



THE ULTIMATE **HANDGUN TRAINING**

HANDBOOK

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Chapter 1

Gun Safety

No book on firearms training that deals with gun handling and marksmanship would be complete without a thorough, up-front discussion of gun safety.

Safety, more especially gun safety, is a major concern for those shooters on and around any gun range when firearms are present. A professional, focused demeanor must be exhibited by all shooters at all times. Any reckless, careless, unsafe and unprofessional gun handling or behavior will never be tolerated or condoned by any observers or fellow shooters. This type of behavior will only demonstrate to all of those in your presence your level of incompetence and your total disrespect for their general safety and welfare. Contrary to this disrespect and reckless disregard for safety, a focused and concerned gun owner must always exhibit proper and correct safety standards whether on the range or alone in the field engaged in recreational shooting.

Remember, always handle your firearms in a safe and responsible manner and keep your head in the game! Further, the Four Universal Rules of Firearms Safety are in effect 24/7 wherever and whenever a firearm is present. Let's start by discussing the importance of the Four Universal Rules of Firearms Safety.

The Four Universal Rules of Firearms Safety

These rules are attributed to Col. Cooper before he became a major influence in the handgun training field; there were, and still are, those who espoused dozens of such rules. Most of these rules were simply reiterations of the others. Recently I saw a modern firearms training video in which the instructor proposed that there were 16 rules of firearms safety. The vast majority of them were silly and insulted the viewer's intelligence. Anyone with a half a room-temperature IQ could have routinely figured out that breaking a couple of them, while on the range, would not put them in any great peril. Cooper culled out all these nonsensical rules and relegated them to the trash heap. Breaking any one of the remaining rules while shooting or training with your firearm, however, might result in death or injury to the shooter and/or his fellow range companions.

Col. Cooper subsequently modified and distilled this hodgepodge of useless and repetitive rules into his Four Universal Rules of Firearms Safety. Any instructor worth his reputation should faithfully promote them on his range or in his classes. I teach them with much passion and ask my students to recite them verbatim in front of their fellow students each day until they are all able to exhibit that they have them firmly committed to memory.

Stephan P. Wenger, in his book *Defensive Use of Firearms*, has added a fifth rule, which states "maintain control of your gun." My feeling is that this line of reasoning is more pertinent to gun ownership and storage than to range safety. It relates to the legal problems that can accrue from having your firearm fall into the wrong hands and end up being used in the commission of a felony offense like armed robbery, murder or the wrongful death of a minor. In many states, you can be charged as an accessory to that crime, the thought being that through your negligence, you facilitated the commission of the crime. Wenger's fifth rule makes a lot of sense and all gun owners should be mindful of its implications. However, I choose not to include it as part of the original four rules. It goes without saying that proper and lawful gun storage of firearms by all gun owners is of the utmost importance at all times.

RULE 1: Treat all weapons as if they are loaded.

Many gun pundits reverse these sentiments when reciting the Four Universal Rules of Firearms Safety and say "All weapons are always loaded!" To me, there is a very obvious distinction here and it may be parsing words, but all weapons are not always loaded. A popular talk show host has a saying that I utilize in my class lectures and writings: Words have meaning and actions have consequences! Think about that for a while, please.



Is this weapon loaded or unloaded? It's impossible to tell without checking the chamber. Thus the rule: Treat all weapons as if they are loaded!

When you are cleaning your weapon and have chamber-checked it several times and it is now field-stripped and lying on your bench, is it loaded? Of course not. When you have decided that you need to send your weapon off to a gunsmith for a certain repair job and you have chamber checked it several times, removed the magazine and partially disassembled it, is it loaded? No.

My point is that a broad-brush statement such as “all weapons are always loaded” simply does not ring true 100% of the time. For example, is a gun in a holster always loaded? True, we must always treat them as if they are loaded, and before putting them into our holsters or placing them in a gun safe or handing them to a fellow student, we need to conduct a chamber check or two. Remember, chamber checking is two seconds of cheap insurance!

RULE 2: Do not point the muzzle at anything you are not willing to destroy.

This is quintessential Cooper and refers to muzzle awareness. The muzzle of your gun is the opening at the end of the barrel out of which the bullet exits when the weapon is fired. Waving your weapon around irresponsibly on the range or in a crowd of fellow shooters on the range is highly unsafe and very disrespectful toward the safety of those around you. You could be covering them with the muzzle. By covering them, I am referring to the physical act of tracking or crossing your friend's body parts with the muzzle of the gun. It does not have to come in physical contact with them.



Keep that muzzle clear of all body parts - including your own!

Who is the biggest culprit when it comes to muzzling someone? You are. In many of your gun handling drills, you will accidentally cover yourself dozens of times. While re-holstering, a new student sometimes places his support-side hand on his holster, to steady it and draw the weapon across his exposed hand. If this were a loaded firearm and you suddenly became muzzle-aware, you would immediately feel the need to never place your hand there again. The safest place for your muzzle to be pointed is always downrange while performing any of the gun handling drills. If that is not an option, then point it toward the ground, finger off the trigger. It should never be pointed anywhere near a fellow student or instructor.

Speaking as an instructor who has had dozens of guns pointed at him on the range, I get very grumpy whenever it occurs! In my defensive handgun classes, we demonstrate how this can happen (with our “index finger gun”) and how to become hyper-muzzle conscious.

RULE 3: Keep your finger off of the trigger and out of the trigger guard until you are pointing it at your intended target.

I consider the trigger guard to be part of the trigger itself. Resting your trigger finger across the trigger guard is a practice that is fraught with potential disaster. If something startles you and you flinch or pull back while in this condition, your trigger finger will pull right back on the trigger and fire off an ND (negligent discharge).



Safe position for trigger finger during practice drills: on the frame and NOT on the trigger guard!

Therefore, get in the habit of placing your trigger finger on the frame of your weapon while you are engaged in any gun handling drills or at the ready position. The only time you may place your trigger finger on the trigger is when you are pointing it at your intended target.

When not pointed at the target or resting at the ready position, your trigger finger must stay firmly pressed against the frame of your weapon, well above the trigger guard. Where, exactly? It depends on the handgun and the length of your trigger finger. Every handgun has a home base or tactile reference point. It can be an exposed shaft end or screw head that the shooter can feel with his trigger finger. The tip of your trigger finger must reside there, unless your gun is pointed at the target and you have made a conscious decision to fire it. With a revolver, your trigger finger should reside right under the cylinder, exactly as described above.

RULE 4: Know what is between you and your intended target and what is beyond.

When you're shooting under the control of a range master, this rule may pale a bit in importance, simply because he has checked the range and deemed it safe to commence the range work at hand. He has done all the work for you. His commands to you state that the range is clear and it is safe to commence with the firing exercise. Nobody is between you and your target or behind said target.



A safe shooting environment: nothing between the shooter and the target and a well-defined, impenetrable backstop.

Out on the street, however, it is a totally different set of circumstances. You must make the determination that it is safe for you to present your weapon and possibly fire at your adversary. If you make the decision to exercise your constitutionally-guaranteed right to self-protection and fire two shots at your assailant and they either miss or overpenetrate and continue down range, the chance is great that one or both of these bullets could strike an innocent bystander. Now you have a Rule #4 violation, possibly a tragic one.

If you had practiced what we call situational awareness and looked beyond your suspected assailant and seen, for example, that a child was playing in her front yard before you presented your weapon, you might have decided that the shot was not safe and had adopted another strategy. If the worst had happened and a bystander were injured, you would now probably have a major legal battle on your hands, either criminal or civil – hence the expression that the only good gunfight is the one that you are able to avoid.

Chamber Checking

Chamber checking is often described as “two seconds of cheap insurance.” It is just that. Chamber checking is the inspection of the chamber of any weapon to determine the status or condition of the chamber or chambers, i.e., is the weapon empty or is it loaded? Unless stipulated in the description, all techniques are for a right-handed shooter.

Semiautomatics Chamber Checking the Semi-Automatic: “Hand Under Dust Cover” Method



Hand under the dust cover. First thumb back the hammer with your support-side thumb. Bring your support-side hand down under the dust cover of the weapon and place your support-side thumb on the left side of the slide with your index and middle finger gripping the right side of the slide.



Press back to the rear with your support-side hand and crack the ejection port open about 1/4". Look inside the chamber area for the presence of or the lack of brass. Release the slide to go home under its own spring tension.

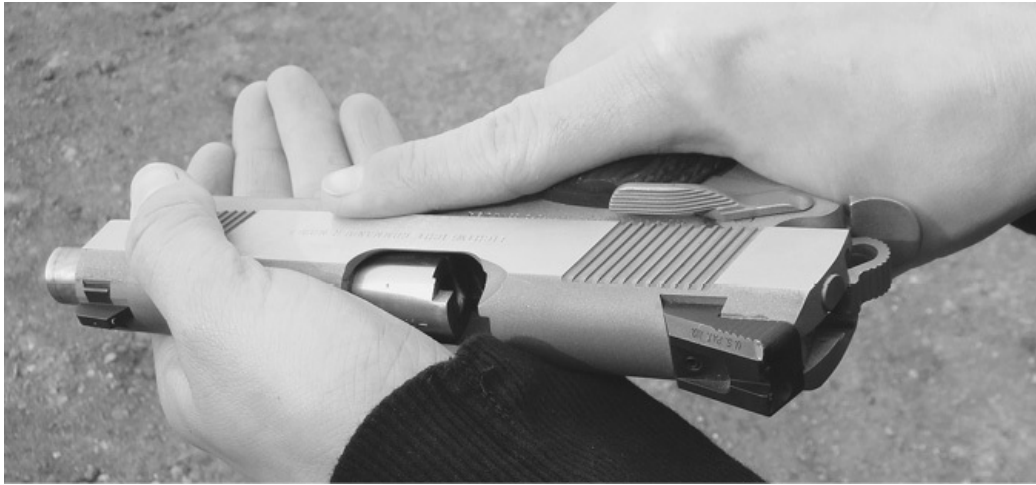
Chamber Checking the Semi-Automatic: "Wedge" Method



Thumb back the hammer with your support-side thumb. Holding the weapon in your firing-side hand, place the web of your support-side hand against the front and top of the slide. Grip the vertical sides of the slide with your index finger and thumb. Grip very tight with both.



The top of the slide should be held securely in that grip. Close down with all the fingers of your support-side hand and press to the rear. Crack the ejection port open about ¼" and inspect for brass or the lack thereof. This gun has a cartridge in the chamber. Release the slide to close shut under its own spring tension.



This gun does not have a cartridge in the chamber. Release the slide to close shut under its own spring tension.

Chamber Checking the Semi-Automatic: “Claw” Method

Another method, “The Claw,” is sometimes used on semiautos that do not have exposed hammers but do have slide-mounted decocking levers and no exposed hammer.

To chamber check using the Claw Method:



Hold the weapon in your support-side hand.



Place your firing-side thumb on the tang of the weapon while engaging both ears of the decocking lever on the slide with your index and middle finger of the firing-side hand.



Now press the slide to the rear by squeezing your fingers to the rear, using your thumb as a fulcrum, thus cracking the ejection open $\frac{1}{4}$ ". Check for the presence or lack thereof of brass in the chamber area. Release the slide.

Revolvers Chamber Checking the Revolver



Holding the weapon in your firing side hand, press the cylinder latch (release) forward or pull it backward, depending on the make or model.



With the index and middle finger of your support-side hand, press the cylinder out of the centerline of the weapon, to the left.



Look into and inspect each chamber for the presence of spent or live cartridges. This cylinder is fully loaded.



To close the cylinder, press it backward to the left into the centerline of the weapon with your support-side thumb.

Chamber-checking is an excellent habit to build. Get into it!

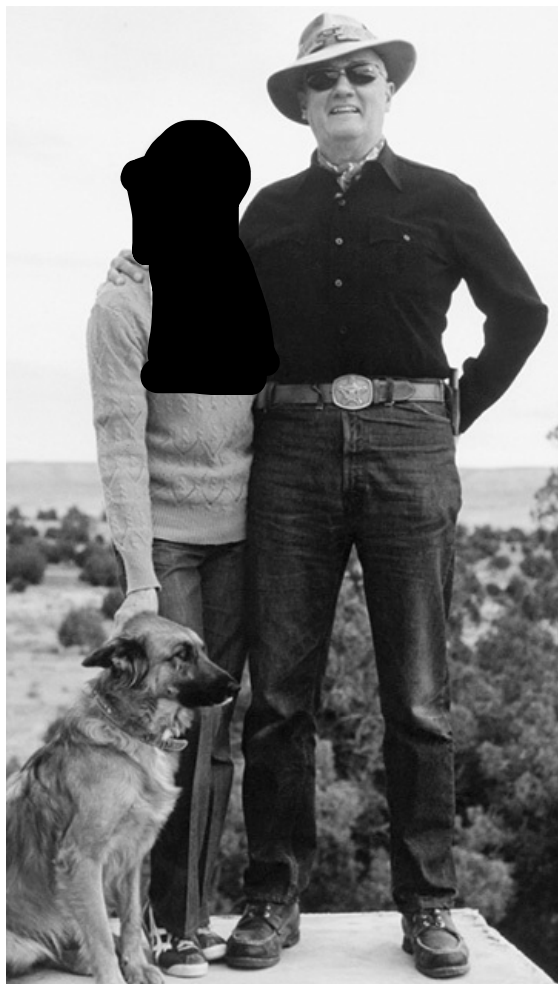
Chapter 2

Mindset

Mindset matters. Maybe most.

In 1972, Col. Jeff Cooper wrote *Principles of Personal Defense*. Many consider it required reading for someone intent on taking responsibility for their personal safety. I agree, but think it should also be required reading in every high school across the country, a book that should be read by all at around the time they become an adult.

Those who did not grow up reading Cooper's words in *Guns & Ammo* and those who have not been to Gunsite to learn and understand his legacy might not grasp the importance of his work or understand just who in the hell this Jeff Cooper guy was. John Dean Cooper was born on May 10, 1920. His friends called him "Jeff" or "Colonel." Cooper was, in fact, a colonel in the Marine Corps, serving in WWII, Korea, and Southeast Asia. In the '50s, Cooper was heavily involved in practical shooting competitions. What Cooper learned there, combined with his personal experiences, helped him recognize and codify useful ideas and techniques. These lessons and experiments led Cooper to develop a methodology of practical pistol shooting known as the Modern Technique of the Pistol.



Jeff and Janelle Cooper at Gunsite.

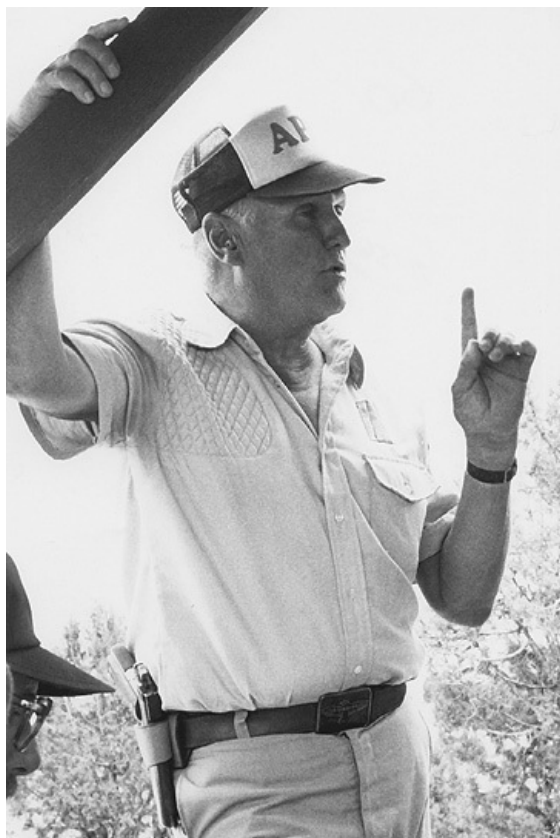
In addition to laying the foundation on which almost all practical pistol training would be and continues to be built upon, Cooper was an outspoken advocate of the four basic rules of gun safety. He was also the founder of the International Practical Shooting Confederation (IPSC), a member of the NRA Board of Directors, and an editor-at-large for *Guns & Ammo* magazine. Cooper taught The Modern Technique of the Pistol in Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Indonesia, Costa Rica, the Philippines, Germany, Belgium, Switzerland, Sweden, South Africa, Southwest Africa, and Rhodesia. But

Cooper's teachings are best known at the school he founded in Paulden, Arizona, during America's Bicentennial year, a school established for the purpose of teaching law-abiding citizens the Modern Technique of the Pistol.

Originally, this school was called the American Pistol Institute (API). Later, when the program of instruction expanded to include rifles and shotguns, the name was changed to Gunsite. Cooper ran Gunsite until 1992, when ownership changed hands. Today, this school is known as the Gunsite Academy and is owned and operated by Buz Mills who, unlike the previous owner who came on after Cooper, was wise enough to embrace Cooper's vision of the school while maintaining the high standards of operation Cooper had demanded during his reign.

Cooper was the recipient of the 1995 Outstanding American Handgunner Award and was the author of a variety of books and many, many magazine articles. Colonel Cooper is considered the Dean of Pistol Shooting. He passed on September 25, 2006, in his home at Gunsite, with his family by his side.

In *Principles of Personal Defense*, Cooper presents an understanding of what being responsible for your own safety is all about. The seven principles Cooper covers in the book are alertness, decisiveness, aggressiveness, speed, coolness, ruthlessness, and surprise. Cooper essentially explains how having the proper mindset is the foundation to winning. Mindset is one of the elements of what Cooper called the "Combat Triad," which was also made up of Marksmanship and Gun Handling.



Cooper's teachings about marksmanship, mindset, and gun handling were ground breaking at the time and are still relevant today.

Any attempt here at conveying the message Cooper presented in *Principles of Personal Defense* would do nothing but fall short of the mark. It is the definitive study on the proper mindset for surviving a lethal confrontation. *Principles of Personal Defense* is a short book with a big message. You can read it in an evening while you sun on the veranda, drinking an Arnold Palmer, sipping fine Irish whiskey or beer, whatever your pleasure demands and budget allows.

Let me go on record now as having given you the best advice I can to save your life: read, consume, and absorb *Principles of Personal Defense*. The book costs less than 20 rounds of good defensive handgun ammunition. For those of you who will not take my advice on this matter, whose wallet is as tight as a barrel bushing on a 1911, who are probably reading this book because someone gave it to you, and with apologies to Col. Cooper, I will outline his message:

- **Alertness:** Be aware, be ready. Bad things can happen at any time. Live by the Gunsite (Cooper) Color Code.
- **Decisiveness:** Counterattack now! Do not tarry. To ponder is to perish.
- **Aggressiveness:** Go at it like you mean it.
- **Speed:** Be sudden, be quick. Be first.
- **Coolness:** Keep your wits. Don't lose control of your emotions.
- **Ruthlessness:** Strike with all your strength with every blow. Shoot them to the ground.
- **Surprise:** Do not wilt, do not cower, and don't be predictable. Fight back.

This, in brief, is the mindset you must have. A close friend of mine believes in luck and, if such a thing exists, it would be a wonderful thing to believe in. But luck, if it does exist, seems to have a way of showing up at random, and while randomness might be acceptable in sports, love, and hunting, is not acceptable when your life is on the line. As it has been said, luck is when opportunity meets preparation. Prepare your mind—get the combat mindset—and when opportunity or bad timing puts your life on the line, preparedness will be there waiting.

I don't have Cooper's command of the English language, nor can I present a discussion with his eloquence. My simple hillbilly upbringing leaves me with mostly analogies to describe the mindset Cooper espoused. I can see elements of these principles when I read about Lt. John Chard's coolness in the preparation and defense of Rorke's Drift. And when I watch Peyton Manning get behind his center and the football finds his hands, I see many of these elements represented in high definition right on my television. When I think about the right mindset I think of men like Rudel: "Only he is lost who gives himself up for lost." Men like Yeager: "Rules are made for people who aren't willing to make up their own." Like Patton: "Do your damndest in an ostentatious manner all the time." And of men like Nathan Bedford Forrest: "Never stand and take a charge. Charge them, too."

I also think of my grandfather, a farmer turned moonshiner turned entrepreneur and, later, a member of the local board of education. He never got past third grade, but, when I was growing up, he was the smartest man I knew. When Grandpa wanted you to get after a job with dedication, he would say, "Get at it like you're killing snakes." I can think of no better way to describe the response that should answer a violent attack.



Born in 1905, my grandfather made his way through prohibition carrying a gun and running moonshine. You cannot survive a life like that without the right mindset.

It's true there has been almost no talk of gunnery in this chapter, and that is by design. Marksmanship is, as a point of fact, a physical act. You do not have to be especially smart to be a good

marksman. You don't even have to be all that worldly or, necessarily, an adult. To be a marksman, you must understand the secret and apply it accordingly.

However, to survive a gunfight, a lethal confrontation, an attack by a troll, or any other wickedness, you'll need more than marksmanship. You'll need the right mindset. There's no shortage of gravestones that rise above those who could shoot but who could not or did not act. The deadliest weapon on Earth is the human brain. Combine one that's hitting on all eight cylinders with a good defensive handgun and the skills to employ it, and good luck and Col. Cooper will be on your side.

The Cooper (Gunsite) Color Code

In addition to his wisdom on the principles of personal defense, Cooper also devised a color code, a four-color categorization of personal awareness that provides a clear and simple mechanism for gauging the level of perceptiveness the situation requires. Color codes to represent levels of awareness or preparedness are nothing new or novel, but Cooper was, it seems, the first to marry this system with personal protection and a mental state. The four colors are white, yellow, orange, and red.

In condition white, you are relaxed, on your sofa watching *Dancing with the Stars* or on the deck, sipping a cold beer and listening to a coyote sing longingly as the sun finds other lands to shine on.

Condition yellow is relaxed awareness. You are on the sidewalk, headed to your favorite eatery, with a lady's arm in yours and a smile on your face. You are not nervous or worried, but you know there is another well-dressed couple behind you, light traffic on the street, and that just around the corner there are generally teenagers riding skateboards and, on occasion, a wino looking for a handout.

A specific alert, one that will startle you in condition white but only elevate your awareness if you are in condition yellow, drives you to condition orange. You have smelled, heard, seen, or felt something you do not like, something that is not right—a ruckus across the street, a shifty look from a stranger, a car stopping abruptly on the curb. Something has won your full attention and will hold it until the balloon goes up or the box is shut.

In condition red, you have identified a specific threat and it is time to react. It is time to exercise every element of the principles of personal protection. Fight or flight.

Chapter 3

Psychological Preparedness for Combat Survival

Winning a fight for your life and surviving depends on both psychological preparedness and well-practiced fighting skills. In this chapter, I shall focus on four key elements of psychological preparedness: situational awareness, positive self-talk, fear control, and mental rehearsal.

When you are psychologically prepared for survival, you are tuned into reality. In the real world, unawareness of an imminent threat, lack of preparedness to effectively deal with it, or denial of its presence mean not surviving. History often provides memorable lessons. For example, Wild Bill Hickok certainly knew how to fight. Yet, he was shot in the back of the head and murdered during a moment of unawareness, while playing a poker game. He had let his guard down.

Good guys and gals like us normally don't go out looking for a fight. That means we have to be psychologically and physically prepared for worst-case scenarios, and that attitude should be taken just as seriously by the non-sworn law abiding armed citizen as it is by any sworn law enforcement officer.

In an emergency, I'll call 9-1-1 just as fast as I can—after I've dealt with any immediate threat. The fact is the police (God bless them) cannot be counted on to get there on time to save you if you are attacked. We must all must be prepared to deal with a criminal aggressor before the cavalry arrives.

Many years ago, the brother of a friend of mine was murdered in a home invasion. In more recent years, a physician in my neighborhood was similarly done in. Despite my rage at these tragic events, I am ashamed to admit that there had always been a part of me that felt that if my "moment of truth" ever came, I'd turn yellow! Then came September 11, 2001, and my outlook underwent major changes.

The events of 9/11 were our nation's wake-up call. Today, we are better prepared to preempt and defend against an attack on our borders. Truly, to my post-9/11 way of thinking, every law-abiding citizen has a stake in maintaining our "homeland security" and a responsibility to do their part. That means being psychologically prepared to use lethal force in defense of one's own life and limb.

Just so you know, I have never served in the military, I'm not a cop, and I have never been in a gunfight. However, given my professional background as a clinical psychologist, and my personal background as the son of a Holocaust survivor, the psychological keys to combat survival are of special interest to me.

Disarmed citizens are at the mercy of violent criminals and tyrannical governments. However, having a weapon will do you little good if you are caught unaware and do not have the chance to employ it (like poor Wild Bill Hickok). Worse yet, if you are unaware, and/or untrained in weapon retention techniques, your weapon can be taken away from you and used against you (one of the arguments employed by the anti-gun rights/pro-gun control crowd). So, the first step in survival is situational awareness.

"Situational awareness" means being your own bodyguard. I like to use Colonel Jeff Cooper's color codes for training on this topic. Cooper's color codes are a continuum that ranges from "Condition White" (completely tuned out and unaware) to "Condition Black" (you're in a fight for your life). It is important to point out that the rationale for the continuum is that you cannot shift directly and abruptly from "Condition White" into "Condition Black." Just as you cannot shift from reverse into drive in your car without first going through neutral, you must go through the intermediary states of awareness and readiness. Let's examine each more closely.

"Condition White" is never appropriate when you are outside the safe confines of your castle, and, even then, it may only be wise to settle into this level of unawareness for brief periods. (Certainly when you are in a deep sleep, you're in White.) So, you'd better have reliable door and window locks and a good alarm system.

Next up is "Condition Yellow." This is the level we should train ourselves to be in most of the time. "Condition Yellow" does not mean being paranoid. It means remaining alert and aware of what is going on around us.

Going into "Condition Orange" means there's something that feels not quite right. You've turned up the flame on the burner and are ready if the situation escalates into a real and imminent threat.

In “Condition Red,” you are prepared for a fight. You expect there’s going to be a fight, but you are not fighting just yet. All conditions spell “GO!” yet you remain cool because you are analyzing your tactical options—If he does that, then, I’ll do this. You are readying yourself to prevail and survive, and you are confident that you will retain the upper hand.

“Condition Black” is the last stage. You are in the fight. If you have prepared up to this point, you’re ahead of the game. You are employing every advantage at your disposal, and because street fights and gun fights are ugly and unfair, you do not give your attacker any benefit of the doubt or any chance to kill you. You fight dirty and cheat to live another day.

Positive Self-Talk

Self-talk is the voice we have in our head that tells us what’s going to happen, and the next thing, and the next. Noted psychologist Albert Ellis has written that we are all born with a biological predisposition to think negatively, pessimistically, and irrationally. If that’s true, and I think it is, then we have to work at countering this. The bottom line is that, if you think you’re going to lose a fight, then you probably will. But it works the other way, too. Assuming you have the requisite physical skills and training, if you think you’re going to win a fight, you have a much better chance of doing just that.

It is a good idea to become more aware of your inner self-talk, or inner voice. First, practice asking yourself, What am I feeling right now? Scared? Sad? Mad? Glad? Once you become familiar with identifying your emotional states or feelings, practice asking yourself, When I feel this way, what am I telling myself? By doing this, you will become familiar with the types of repetitive thoughts and mental images or pictures your mind generates in response to different situations.

If your inner self-talk is negative and self-defeating, it is necessary to practice countering it with positive (but realistic) self-talk. For example, replace I can’t learn to do this with I can learn to do this, and I will learn it. Replace, too, negative mental images with those that program your subconscious mind for mastery, victory, and survival. For example, if you see or imagine yourself looking like an easy mark to a couple of punks, practice imagining yourself displaying a more confident and self-reliant demeanor.

Fear Control

Author and security consultant Gavin de Becker wrote a book called *The Gift of Fear*. What he was trying to get at with the title is that fear is a feeling that should be acknowledged and then responded to, as a signal that there may be a problem that needs to be dealt with. Fear must be heeded for the information it can provide. It is your body’s and mind’s automatic responses to a perceived threat, a signal it’s time to move from “Condition Yellow” to “Condition Orange” and as far along the color continuum as the situation dictates.

When we are confronted with a threat to our survival, our bodies automatically prepare for fight or flight. The perceived threat triggers what Massad Ayoob, the developer of the Stressfire defensive shooting system, has clearly explained as a physiological “Body Alarm Reaction,” or BAR. When the BAR is triggered, there’s a massive adrenaline dump into the bloodstream. This stimulant hormone causes our heart to race, our blood pressure to rise, our muscles to tense, our visual and auditory focus to narrow, our visual and auditory acuity to increase, and our breathing to quicken and become shallow. If we are trained to fight, and there is no opportunity to preclude the fight, our body is physiologically prepared to do so reflexively. If we perceive an opportunity to flee and avoid the fight, our body is prepped to do that, also. So, the BAR is adaptive, at least to a point.

If the BAR gets out of hand, or we are not prepared to fight and we perceive no opportunity to flee, then we may freeze. This is definitely not a good option in the face of the tiger. Remember, to survive, fear must be controlled. And, for fear to be controlled, it first must be acknowledged. Recognize that fear is a natural response when facing the tiger, and not a sign of cowardice. Now, once fear is acknowledged, the body alarm reaction must be controlled and harnessed to pump our fighting machine.

When fear gets out of hand and the BAR is in overdrive, psychologically, we feel that we are going to die. As a result, physiologically, not only do our muscles tense up (or sometimes go limp), but we tend to hold our breath, feel a tightness in our chest, breathe shallowly (or heavily) from our upper chest, and/or hyperventilate and become light-headed. Our body temperature drops and our hands and feet turn cold (or perhaps sweaty). Our stomach, bladder and bowels also react. We may feel butterflies or

pain in our stomach, and we may lose bladder or bowel control. We may feel as if our body is going to explode or implode, or that we are going to jump out of our skin. All of the above result in our feeling more tense, vulnerable, and out of control. There are three remedies for this.

The first is a physiological step. You must become aware of breath holding, erratic or shallow breathing, or hyperventilation and control it. You can begin to learn breath control by taking three to five slow, deep, and controlled breaths when you are by yourself in a safe environment (in Conditions White or Yellow). I teach my clients to inhale deeply through their nose to a count of five, hold it for a count of three, and then to exhale forcefully through their mouth to a count of eight, blowing stress and tension out into the atmosphere. If this is too difficult at first, you can inhale as deeply as you can, hold, and exhale as forcefully as you can to lower counts, and then work up to greater breath depth and higher numbers as you get better at it. At first, you may feel somewhat light-headed, but with continued practice, the light-headedness will disappear and you will notice that you feel more relaxed, alert, and in control.

Slow, controlled, deep breathing is a switch that turns down the BAR and turns on the relaxation response. It's a good idea to practice this skill often throughout the day and enjoy how much more in charge you feel. It only takes a minute or so. As you retrain yourself to become more aware of your breathing, first in normal situations and then in normal, everyday stressful situations, you will eventually be able to employ your breathing to your advantage in a crisis such as a fight. Of course, in the middle of a fight, you are not going to have time to focus on your breathing. The point is that, if you've practiced, you'll automatically breathe away your unnecessary stress and tension.

The second remedy to runaway BAR is a psychological step and the second key element discussed above, positive self-talk. If you were faced by three gang-banging punks, but you had Steven Seagal and Chuck Norris on your side, you'd probably feel more confident wouldn't you? What would you be telling yourself?

The idea is to talk to yourself in such a way that your body gets the message to turn the BAR down to a level that is optimal to the circumstances at hand, just enough activation to be able to use your training to smartly deal with your attackers and prevail. For example, faced with a home invasion in the middle of the night, you want to be telling yourself things like, We've planned for this. We are going to follow our plan. Step one is Step two is We are NOT going to &*\$%\$ing die tonight!

The third step to reducing BAR is mental rehearsal. Like dry-fire practice with an empty firearm, this enables you to practice employing all of the above techniques and your physical and tactical training in your mind enough times so that, if the real deal ever transpires, you are ready. Competitive shooters use visualization techniques like this, as do other successful athletes. The key is to mentally visualize and go through in your mind (mentally rehearse) how you want to handle a challenging situation.

This exercise works best if you first put yourself into a relaxed state using slow, controlled, deep breathing. When you are relaxed, you cannot also be tense, stressed, or scared, because relaxation and these other states are emotional and physical opposites. So, by first getting relaxed, you calm your mind and, thus, can think more clearly and concentrate better. You are more alert and aware and in tune with reality. Your negative self-talk, which is often exaggerated and unrealistic, gets turned down, and your subconscious mind is more receptive to positive impressions.

Use mental rehearsal to run movies in your head of you dealing with a challenging situation, doing what you have to do, and winning. You are the producer and the director, so take full editorial privileges. Explore different scenarios, different variables, different tactics, and different outcomes. Run it forward and backward. Cut and splice segments.

You can also employ mental rehearsal as a means of learning techniques from an expert role model. The first step is to closely observe the expert performing the skill. The second step is to imagine what it would feel like to be that expert as he or she performs the skill. If your fear or distraction level goes up, simply interrupt the imagery rehearsal to get more relaxed with your neutral breathing, and then go back to your mental rehearsal.

You can also employ mental rehearsal (which I cover more fully later on) by triggering a mini BAR and then employing breath control and positive self-talk to turn it down. Purposefully seek out and confront uncomfortable or slightly risky situations that get your level of physiological arousal up. Then practice your neutral breathing and positive self-talk to overcome it.

Chapter 4

Your Body's Natural reactions

If there is any such thing as a certainty in defensive shooting, it's the natural, instinctive reactions that occur when you're surprised by a lethal threat.

Instinctive reactions are those things that humans do without prior exposure or training; they are those things that are seemingly hard-wired in our brains from birth¹². Reacting to a loud noise, for instance, is a readily observable trait in newborns; babies in the womb, too, are reported to react to a startling sound.

Instinctive reactions to threats have developed over millennia in the human animal; the ability to stay alive among predators, many of them easily able to take down homo sapiens, is why we're at the top of the food chain today. Without some sort of built-in mechanism to automate our responses we likely would not have made it this far.

It's important to understand that these natural reactions happen when you're truly surprised by an attack, and they last for a relatively short amount of time. The half-life of the catecholamine hormones that facilitate your reactions is measured in minutes¹³, which means that their effect starts deteriorating very rapidly after the onset of the reactions. Your body's reactions are therefore very short-duration events that, understood and trained for, allow you to gain the upper hand when you're already behind the curve.

One of the salient points regarding your body's natural instinctive reactions is that they can't be trained away. You can learn to suppress their amplitude or to convert them to intuitive responses more efficiently, but they are almost certain to occur. Understanding them is the first step to taking advantage of them.

Identifying the natural reactions

When faced with a lethal threat your brain directs your body to make some rather amazing transformations¹⁴. There are many different reactions, some large and others almost unnoticeable, that enable you to deal with something that poses a threat to your existence. Detailing all of them would be a book in itself.

As it happens, it's not necessary for you to understand all of them. There are only about a half-dozen unique reactions¹⁵ that are important from the standpoint of defensive shooting, important in the sense that they affect how and what you train. In the chapters that follow, you'll find techniques that build on and take advantage of these natural survival reactions, allowing you to respond more efficiently than trying to force an unnatural, artificial technique into the situation (if you even could.)

By training properly you can make the transition from instinctive reaction to intuitive response faster, easier, and without cognitive thought.

External manifestations

Some of the body's natural reactions are external, meaning that they're observable. When you watch surveillance camera footage you'll often see all three of these reactions, all happening approximately simultaneously or, at the very least, in extremely rapid succession. (The order in which I've presented them should not be taken as a timeline of any sort.)

Lowering of the body's center of gravity

If you think about it, preparing for any physical activity - be it running away or fighting - requires that the body first drop its center of gravity. Stand in front of a mirror and try to move naturally without changing the height of your belly button; you'll find that you can do nothing more than a robot-like shuffling. When you need to move immediately, like when you're faced with a sudden threat, your body naturally drops its center of gravity to prepare for an extreme exertion. This puts your body in a superb position from which it can lunge or move rapidly to either side, both of which are definite survival positives when facing something that wants to eat you.



Lowering center of gravity prepares the body to fight or run, as the situation dictates. Knees bend, body weight drops toward the ground.

This lowering of the center of gravity looks like a shallow crouch; your knees bend causing your body to drop, while at the same time your upper torso leans forward at the hips to maintain balance; the buttocks are forced backward to compensate.

Hands moving toward the line of sight

Humans, as you may have been told, are truly visual creatures. You derive a huge portion of what you know from what you see, and in a lethal encounter that's especially true: what you know of the threat comes mainly from what your eyes tell you. As a result, your mind is hard-wired to protect that most valuable asset.



When startled, one of the most common reactions is the movement of the hands toward the eyes, to protect the head.

When people are startled, their hands start to move in a protective manner toward their line of sight; they flinch toward the eyes. They don't always make it all the way, of course, for a number of reasons (including familiarity with certain stimuli). They do almost always start in that direction, however, and again you can see this very often in videos of actual surprise attacks.

One thing I've noticed is that this flinch, as we'll call it, is convulsive. The muscles that produce the movement tense suddenly and violently, throwing the hands into motion; the shoulders often hunch or roll forward in concert. Sometimes the flinch rises and subsides seemingly without the subject being aware that it even happened.

Orienting to the threat

At the onset of a surprise stimulus the body tends to orient to whatever it is that is identified as being a potential threat. The head turns to put the threat into its line of sight, where binocular vision is at its most useful, and the body usually follows by squaring up to the threat so that it can employ its natural weapons: hands and feet.

This is not a boxing stance, which is a learned position; the natural stance is neutral, in that the body is parallel to the threat and the feet are directly under the body, preparing to move in any direction needed. Any off-axis orientation, such as blading to the threat, would make movement to one side more difficult than the other; it's easy to see how that could be a detriment to survival.

Internal reactions

The external reactions are aided and supplemented by some internal reactions, all of which have to do with changes in blood flow in the body. The blood carries oxygen and the myriad of chemicals which serve to initiate all of the transformations which occur as a result of the threat¹⁶. As it happens, if you can see the external manifestations we just talked about, you know that these internal reactions have also occurred. The external reactions serve as markers that prove the internal ones are happening as well.

Again, in no particular order:

Increase in resolution in the center of the field of vision

The retina of the eye uses rods and cones to collect and transmit image information to the optic nerve, and that information is sent to the visual cortex where it's interpreted as sight. In the middle of the retina is the fovea, which is populated exclusively by cones, which have higher resolution and faster reaction times than the rods. As a result, the fovea is capable of delivering a much higher level of detail than is the rest of the retina. When the body's alarm response is activated, changes in blood supply to the eye cause most of the information to come from this center where all the cones are located. The result is an increase in resolution, though with a very narrow angle of view. This has a very positive effect on survivability, because it allows the gathering of much more information specifically about the threat.

Reduction in blood flow to the extremities

When faced with a sudden possibility of lethal injury, the body shunts blood from the extremities - hands and feet - to the core. There are several explanations for this phenomenon, but the end result is a decrease in blood to the hands and fingers.



Changes in blood flow to the eye affect focusing and increase resolution in the center of the field of vision.

When blood flow is reduced, there is a decrease in strength, dexterity and tactile sensation. Hands might tremble a bit, have trouble doing complex tasks that rely on muscle control, and have less feeling. This sounds entirely negative, but consider the upside: that same reduced blood flow also means that damage to the extremities won't be felt as keenly, and injuries won't result in dangerous blood loss as quickly.

The downsides of reduced dexterity and tactile sensation are something that we have to work around when we design techniques for handling tools (the gun).

Distortions in the perception of time

One of the more unusual natural reactions is a distortion in the perceived passage of time during a lethal attack. In most cases people report that time slows down, making things appear to be happening at a slower rate - including their own responses to what they're seeing. In reality both the person and the world are still moving at the same speed, but their brains report that they're not.

This becomes a real issue if you have to do anything which requires visual input, since that's where the distortion occurs. Though you may believe you are moving slowly, in reality the rest of the world isn't - which means there is a disconnect between what you think is happening and what actually is.

I've actually experienced this as the result of a severe fright. When I was in college I once parked on a seedy street in a not-terribly-good area of a large city. Walking back to my car I noticed a rather hulking male following me; I quickened my pace, but so did he. I ran to my car and tried to put my key into the door (this was long before the days of remote control locks). I clearly remember trying to get the key in the hole, knowing full well that there was someone closing in, but I couldn't seem to do it fast enough. I tried to speed up but that only caused me to fumble, which in turn fed my panic, which seemed to make things slow down even more! I finally got the key in the lock, jumped into the car and hit the lock button - about the time the fellow ran past me, yelling at a couple of other men on the far end of the block to "wait for me!"

There have been many explanations for why this phenomenon occurs¹⁷ and there is a lot of ongoing research to find out the exact neurological mechanism, but, for our purposes, it's enough to understand that the effect occurs and that it affects both your emotional and physical reactions to what you're seeing.

Interestingly, some people report that time seems to speed up during an incident. Though research is still in its infancy, some of the most important researchers in the field of time distortions suggest¹⁸ that this is a result of training or habituation to a stimulus. Those who have trained certain techniques or maneuvers to the point that they can do them without cognitive thought - without being aware of directing themselves to do those things - usually perceive that they're moving at a faster rate than they really are. This is a very real benefit of training.

In the chapters that follow, I'll be referencing these natural reactions to explain why I make certain recommendations.

Working with the body's natural reactions

Why the focus on these reactions? As I said earlier, these reactions affect how and what you train. We go back to our task of efficiency, making the best use of our resources to achieve a specific goal. If the techniques you've trained run counter to what your body actually does when threatened, your response is likely to be delayed (or even circumvented).

A more efficient response happens when you train techniques that work with the body's natural reactions. That's the basis of intuitive skills: things you learn that work well with the way your body works (as opposed to instinctive skills, which are generally considered to be "hard wired" into our brains and require no prior education or exposure).

What is intuitive?

You can learn to do a lot of things that aren't intuitive. Take, for instance, the horn in your car. The horn button is on the face of the steering wheel, usually in the middle or in a place where your open palm can mash it and get sound. In a panic situation your hands are already in proximity because they're on the wheel; all you have to do is flatten your palm and push forward - in the same direction your braking foot is already moving. It also keeps your hand in contact with the wheel, which is a big psychological advantage. Using the horn is a sympathetic movement that requires little to no training, because it works well with what your body is already doing and prefers to do.



Hitting the horn in your car is considered to be an intuitive act because it works well with what your body does naturally.

What if that horn button required you to reach to the side of the steering column and turn a little knob counter-clockwise? You could certainly learn to do it, but when that little kid darts out from between cars, oblivious to your presence, it wouldn't be an easy maneuver to perform. It doesn't work well with anything else your body is doing, and you might not end up doing it at all. It is non-intuitive.

It stands to reason that intuitive skills, those that work well with how the body already functions, are easier to learn, easier to remember and, more importantly, easier to recall when needed because they are a more natural extension of the physical processes that you already do naturally. They are more efficient, and lead to a more efficient response.

Justifying non-intuitive skills?

Instinctive reactions cannot be trained away because they're things that our bodies are hard-wired to do. You can decide to train in ways that work with those reactions or in ways that work against them.

In neither case can you replace them.

I've run into many people who insist on training in non-intuitive ways - ways that run counter to what science and medicine (and objective visual evidence) say about how humans react. The justification is usually something like, "I've done it for so long, it's natural to me now."

Things that work against your body's natural reactions are never 'natural.' They may be habitual, familiar from repetition when your instinctive reactions have not been initiated, but that doesn't make them natural. For instance, adopting a bladed boxer's stance because it 'feels natural' works against the body's natural desire to square itself to the target and crouch as it lowers its center of gravity. That special learned stance might be comfortable, but it's not likely to be what happens when your threat responses have been activated.

Habitual? Yes. Familiar? Certainly. Natural? No.

Key points to remember

1) The body's natural reactions are a function of neurology and physiology, and don't vary all that much from person to person.

2) The natural instinctive reactions cannot be trained away, but they can be controlled or converted through training.

3) The external reactions which are visible are markers of the underlying internal reactions.

4) These reactions happen when suddenly confronted with a lethal threat, not so much when you know something is going to happen. Training based on proactive action does not activate these reactions, no matter how 'stressful' it is.

5) Your training needs to take these natural reactions into account if you are to be efficient, because trying to supplant them with non-intuitive techniques is inefficient at best, and more likely impossible in a real incident.

Chapter 5

The Modern Technique

The Modern Technique of the Pistol is a series of concepts originally assembled by Col. Jeff Cooper. After studying various successful pistol manipulation methods for practical shooting, Cooper added his personal perspectives of logic to create a training methodology called the “Modern Technique.” This foundation is still used today as the basis for all small arms training at Gunsite. It is a solid foundation that, when built correctly, will not wash away. The Modern Technique combines proper mental conditioning with gun handling and marksmanship skills to accomplish a balance of speed, power, and accuracy.

Marksmanship, Gun Handling, and Mindset make up Cooper’s Combat Triad. The balancing of these three elements is the key to winning a lethal confrontation. Mindset, which is one side of the Combat Triad, was discussed in [Chapter 2](#). Marksmanship and Gun Handling will be covered here.

Achieving a competent level of practical marksmanship requires, according to Cooper, proficiency in the Weaver Stance, the presentation of your gun, the flash sight picture, and the compressed surprise break, all with the heavy duty pistol. When all these elements are executed with the proper poise and proficiency, they provide an equal balance of accuracy, power, and speed. Or, as Cooper would have said, in Latin, “*Diligentia, vis, celeritas* (DVC).”

These three terms, loosely translated to the Modern Technique, would mean:

- Accuracy—You must hit your attacker in order to injure him.
- Power—You must strike with sufficient force to incapacitate.
- Speed—You must strike quickly and first.

Weaver Stance

The Weaver Stance was developed by Jack Weaver, of Lancaster, California, for the purpose of ensuring quick and accurate shot placement with a handgun. It very much resembles a fighting stance that might be used by a boxer or mixed martial arts fighter. This stance allows you to deliver force quickly, while maintaining balance and the ability to move.

Though variations of the Weaver stance exist, the Weaver stance is more of a method than an exact pose. It is paramount that shooters are comfortable in their stance and, since we are all physically different in many ways, we should expect some variation in how each of us employs the Weaver stance. It’s maybe easiest to describe the Weaver Stance one body part at a time:

Feet—About shoulder width apart with your left foot (right foot for left-handed shooters) slightly leading. This places your feet in the best position to move, manage recoil, or maintain your balance if you suffer a forceful blow from an attacker.

Legs—Your legs should be slightly bent, with your knees just above or just behind your toes. If your legs are straight, you lose the ability to move or change locations quickly. Straight legs also hinder your ability to control recoil.



In the Weaver shooting stance, your feet should be positioned in what many consider a fighting stance. Knees should be slightly bent.

Head—The head is held erect, just as you would normally stand. You bring the handgun up in front of your eyes; you do not lower your eyes (head) to the handgun. Do not lean your head to one side. A head held erect allows your peripheral vision to work better, and overall it's a more comfortable position. A slight bending of the neck is not considered inappropriate, but avoid the tendency to do the "turtle," hunching or pinching your shoulders.



Your head should be erect. This is where you are most comfortable and where your eyes work best.

Back—Your back is straight, but angled slightly at the waist so that your shoulders are about directly above or slightly behind your knees. This ensures your ability to effectively deal with recoil and helps maintain balance.



Your back should be straight, and your shoulders should be almost directly above your knees.

Shooting Hand—The handgun is gripped as high as possible so that the barrel is in line with the bone in your arm. This helps with recoil control and allows you to keep the handgun orientated towards the threat with as little muzzle rise as possible between shots. The thumb of the shooting hand is held upwards, tucked down along the grip of the handgun or pointed towards the target. With a revolver, the thumb is most often held in a downward or tucked position.



Grip the handgun high. Place the web between your thumb and index finger as high on the grip as possible.

Support Hand—The support hand wraps over the shooting hand, knuckles over knuckles, fingers over fingers. The support hand is positioned high on the gun. The support hand thumb can be held over the shooting hand thumb. This is almost a necessity with a revolver. Alternately, both thumbs can be pointed up or towards the target.



The support hand should wrap around the grip over the shooting hand.

Arms—Ideally, your shooting arm will be straight. However, both arms can be slightly flexed if that is more comfortable for you. Regardless, the support arm should be bent at the elbow at something between a 45- and 90-degree angle. Essentially, the shooting hand exerts forward pressure on the rear of the handgun's grip, and the support hand exerts rearward pressure. The arms essentially form an isometric equilibrium, holding the handgun solidly in place.



Your forearm should be in line with the barrel of the handgun.

There are indeed arguments against the Weaver Stance, and it's true most who compete in combat-style pistol matches either do not use it or they use a radically altered version of it. However, based on my training experiences, the Weaver Stance is the easiest stance for most new shooters to learn. It is the most natural to assume, because everyone has, at one time or another, stood in some sort of a boxing stance. Too, the Weaver Stance integrates very well with other handgun manipulation and shooting exercises.

It is suggested that, when you start shooting, you try to use the correct Weaver stance. As you become more comfortable shooting and as your skills develop, it is very likely you will allow this position to evolve into your own comfortable version of the Weaver Stance. This is acceptable as long as the basic form or premise of the stance is adhered to.

Presentation

Handgun presentation is the delivery of the handgun from a holster or place of rest to alignment with the target. Although presentation is a single fluid motion, it is made up of five sequential steps. When done properly, and with a smooth blending of each step into the next, a presentation looks fluid and unencumbered. Here is the presentation as it is taught at Gunsite but with comments about integrating a laser into the procedure.

Grip—Your shooting hand goes to the handgun and you establish a firing grip with your trigger finger straightened outside the holster and parallel to the handgun's barrel. If the handgun has a manual safety, your thumb should be placed in position to disengage the safety, but the safety remains on at this time. At the same time your shooting hand is establishing a grip, your support hand should be moved to the center of your torso. The palm of the support hand should be flat against your body and the thumb should be extended and pointed towards your head.



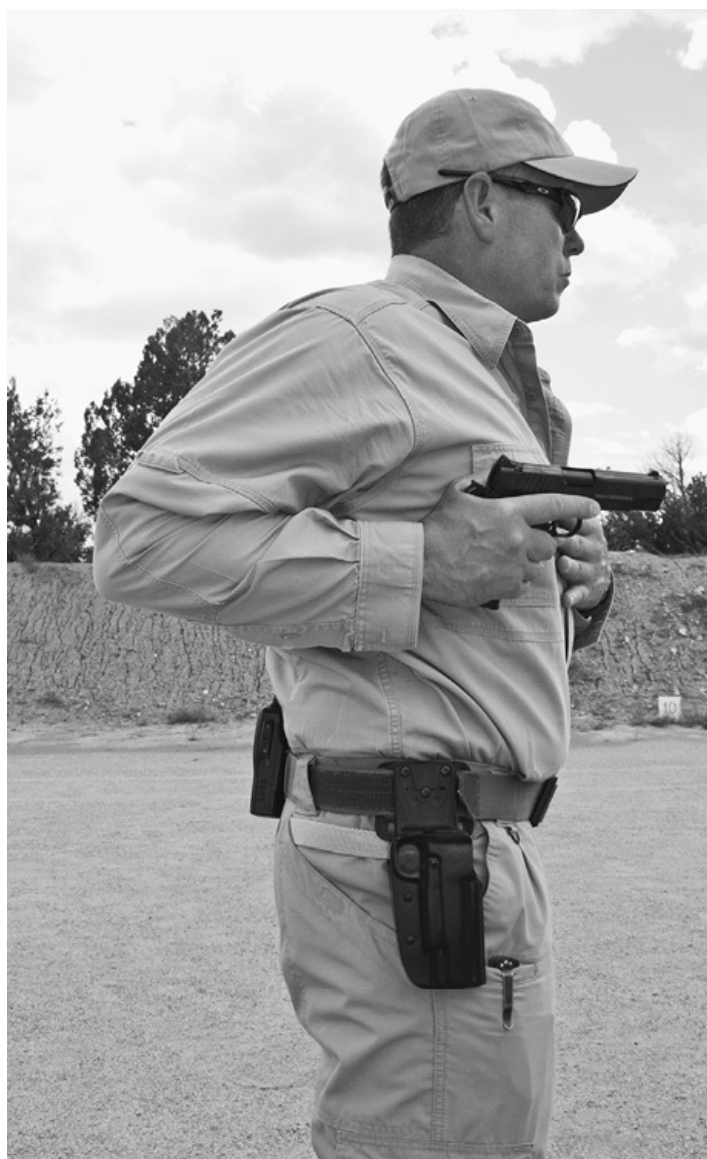
The first step in gun presentation is to establish a shooting grip, trigger finger straight and support hand at center chest.

Clear—The shooting hand lifts the handgun from the holster until the muzzle has cleared it. The trigger finger remains straight alongside the frame. The support hand does not move.



At the second stage of the presentation, clearing the holster, the support hand is still center chest.

Rotate—The shooting hand rotates the handgun so it is orientated towards the threat and the safety can be disengaged. This rotation occurs primarily at the shoulder. At this time, your handgun should be on target. Advancing the presentation into the world of the modern handgun—which should be equipped with a laser—at this stage the laser should be shining brightly on the target. Should the need arise, the handgun can be fired from this position. When do you put your finger on the trigger? When your sights (laser) are on the target.



In step three of the presentation, rotate the handgun towards the target.

As a matter of fact, if you are engaged in an extreme close quarters situation, it may be most desirable to shoot from this position. You may be using your support hand to keep your attacker at a distance or to fend off blows. You also may be close enough to the threat that you do not wish to fully extend your handgun at arm's length for fear your attacker might grab it. If this is the case, the support hand can move to the handgun to establish a two-handed grip, or it can be used to fight off an attack.

Ready—Now move your support hand to the pistol to establish the two-handed grip you will use to fire the handgun.

Engage or Look—This step completes the presentation with full assumption of the Weaver Stance, your primary shooting platform. The sights should be aligned on the target and your finger should be on the trigger. Here you should be looking for visual confirmation that it is indeed time to pull the trigger.

Now, there are two other positions that need discussion. These are positions you will work from when on the range, but also positions you may need to assume before, during, or after an actual confrontation. These are called “ready” positions



In step No. 5, the completion of the presentation of the handgun, you will be in the full assumption of the Weaver Stance, with the sights on the target and your finger on the trigger.

The Low Ready Position—It may become apparent during presentation that the need to shoot is not immediate. If so, once a two-handed grip has been established, the ready position can be assumed. With the low ready position, you have a two-handed grip and the handgun is orientated in the direction of the threat, but the muzzle is at about a 45-degree angle, ideally pointing at the ground somewhere between you and the threat or potential threat. In the low ready position, the finger is held straight and parallel with the barrel, outside the trigger guard. This is a gun-out position you might use when moving and when expecting a threat to appear (or when practicing on the range).

The High Ready Position—The high ready position differs from the low ready position in that the handgun is on target but held just low enough that the target can be seen clearly. Without a laser, the sights should be aligned to point at the pelvic area of your attacker and your eyes should be intently watching for a visual clue that it is time to shoot. Given that clue and pelvic area sight alignment, you can pull the trigger immediately or raise the handgun for a center mass shot and then fire. If your sights are on the target, your finger is on the trigger. However, just because you are in the high ready position does not mean your finger must be on the trigger. Your finger being on the trigger is dependent

on your sights being on a target. Depending on the circumstances, you might actually be moving in this position or you might be waiting behind cover for an opportunity.

From the standpoint of the modern, laser-equipped handgun, the high ready position involves lowering the handgun just enough so that the full threat can be seen over the handgun. However, the laser sight remains center mass so that, if necessary, you can engage without having to reacquire the sights.

When should the high ready position be used? Immediately after engagement, when you are attempting to assess the situation, or immediately prior to shooting an attacker you may have been holding at gunpoint, or one who is possibly on the brink of crossing the line that would allow the use of deadly force.

Another ready position tracks back to position three. As soon as the handgun is rotated towards the target and the laser is seen on the target/threat, you have established the laser-ready position. In this position, you can engage a threat as needed without any further movement.

As a side note, the question that always surfaces is, "When should/can my finger be on the trigger?" The answer is simple: anytime you have confirmation your sights are on target.

Holstering

Ninety-nine times out of 100, you should never be in a hurry to put your handgun back in your holster. When you holster your handgun, you are giving up a large amount of control over any situation. So take your time returning the handgun to its resting place, not only to ensure you remain in control of a bad situation, but because one of the most common instances in which someone shoots themselves is when they try to holster in too much of a hurry.



At the point you decide it is time to holster, remove your finger from the trigger and extend it straight along the frame of the handgun.

When you have decided it is time to holster, you should probably be in a ready position; the situation has been assessed, ammunition concerns have been tended to, and no threat currently exists. At that time—with your finger out of the trigger guard and extended parallel to the barrel—you can engage the safety and move in reverse through positions three, two, and one.

Flash Sight Picture

The flash sight picture is exactly what it says. It is nothing more than a visual recognition that it is the correct time to fire the handgun. What most shooters do not understand is that to get vital zone hits at defensive handgun ranges, it is not necessary to perfectly align the sights on the exact spot you want to hit.

This will be further discussed in the chapter on handgun sights, but consider the notion that a flash sight picture is nothing more than a visual indication it is time to pull the trigger. When you master the secret, you will better understand how what you are essentially doing is pulling the trigger of your handgun with your eyes.

Surprise Break

Cooper taught and believed in the surprise break when pulling the trigger. In other words, he felt you should be surprised when the handgun fired. This is indeed, and almost without question, the best way to learn the secret. If you anticipate when the trigger will break (causing the gun to fire), you will almost, without fail, flinch or jerk the handgun off target.

Ideally, with the surprise break, you ever increase the pressure on the trigger until it breaks, firing the gun at a moment during which you were expecting the bang, but did not know exactly when it was coming. Cooper called it a “compressed surprise break,” and the more difficult the shot, the less the break was compressed, meaning the smaller the target and/or the longer the distance to that target, the longer the time between when you start applying pressure to the trigger and when the shot should break.

When it comes to teaching a new shooter or a shooter with accuracy problems, the surprise break is the only method to teach. Actually, it is the best method to teach regardless the student, but, somewhat ironically, once a student has mastered the secret, they should never be surprised when their handgun fires. You do not want to set before a jury and have to admit you were surprised your gun fired and mortally wounded the man who was attacking you. You don’t want to explain how you had time to gradually apply ever increasing amounts of pressure to the trigger until the gun fired and that you were surprised when it did. No. Someone who has mastered the secret by conducting the 3,000 to 5,000 repetitions it takes to get there should know exactly when their handgun will fire, and they need to be able to say, “At this precise moment I knew I had to shoot to save my life, and that’s the exact time I pulled the trigger.”

Learn with the surprise break, but learn well enough you don’t need to use it. This may seem to be in direct contradiction to the Modern Technique, when it is actually no different than the proper execution of handgun presentation. Handgun presentation has five distinct steps, and entwined in those steps are various points where decisions must be made. However, when a shooter properly executes the presentation of his handgun, it is with one fluid motion. It is a feat that can be accomplished only after thousands of correct performances.

The difference between Cooper’s compressed surprise break and knowing the exact moment when your handgun will fire is no different. After thousands of correct compressed surprise breaks, you will indeed know when your handgun will fire—and even then there will be situations and conditions that require you to rely on that compressed surprise break to ensure you hit the target.

Semi-Automatic Pistols in Large Calibers

Cooper’s idea of a semi-automatic pistol in a large caliber was a 1911 in .45 ACP. He did not appreciate the 9mm Luger and figured the .45 was twice as effective. Gunsite currently defines Cooper’s semi-automatic pistol in a large caliber as a “heavy-duty pistol,” meaning “the pistol must be sufficiently robust and powerful to hold up in a combat environment and stop a fight.” This could be any number of modern and even not so modern handguns. Cooper’s prime suspect was the 1911, a gun that has been with us for 100 years and is still a viable candidate. So are many, many other handguns.

Handgun selection is an important part of any equation, when it comes to personal protection with such a tool, and we might as well touch on it here. Advice, in the simplest form, could be to select the largest, most reliable handgun in the most powerful cartridge you can and will carry on a daily basis and that you can use to deliver fast and repetitive shots on target. If that handgun turns out to be Dirty Harry’s .44, more power to you. If it’s Bond’s little Walther, so be it.

You have to have your handgun on you in order for it to be of any value. If it is too big or too heavy, you’ll leave it in the car or at home. Give this serious consideration, when selecting a handgun you intend to carry. All over America, there’s a movement for concealed carry, and gun manufactures are learning it is the compact handguns that have the most appeal. This is because, for most folks, that’s all they can comfortably or will carry on a daily basis.

Nobody likes to dress like a perverted flasher. If we did, we could all carry shotguns. Experiment with different handguns and different holsters until you find something that works for you and ignore that tac-tard on television who’s telling you this or that gun or cartridge isn’t sufficient for self-defense. You cannot defend yourself or your loved ones with a handgun you do not have.

Of course, your handgun also has to be reliable. What constitutes acceptable reliability? Cooper suggested no more than one malfunction in 1,000 rounds. No matter your handgun, shoot it enough and it will malfunction either due to the ammo, the shooter, or because of its design. Maybe the gun gods have foretold that your pistol will function perfectly for 1,005 shots, but will jam on shot number 1,006 or 1,050. If you can run 50 rounds of defensive ammo through your handgun without a malfunction

while conducting practical drills, then trust that handgun/ammo combination until you have reason not to.

As we've just explored, Cooper's Combat Triad was made up of three elements, Marksmanship, Mindset, and Gun Handling. We have already touched on marksmanship and mindset. Both subjects will continue to be touched on throughout this book. Gun handling, beyond presentation, is a bit more complex subject, due to the fact that there are so many different kinds of handguns. But what we can do is identify a laundry list of activities that cover all the elements of weapon manipulation you should be able to perform.

Loading—Though the types of handguns suited to concealed carry/personal protection vary a great deal, they generally come in two forms, pistol or revolver. For the most part, all pistols are loaded in the same manner, as are all revolvers.

For a pistol, start with the gun unloaded and retrieve a magazine. It should be held in your support hand with the tip of the index finger touching the top cartridge, and the bottom of the magazine in the center of your palm. Insert the magazine into the magazine well and fully seat it with force. With the pistol pointed in a safe direction, reach across the top of the pistol with your support hand and grasp the slide. Your thumb should be pointed at your chest. Pull the slide fully to the rear and let it go. Do not ease the slide forward. Allow the recoil spring to exert its full force, thus returning the pistol into battery. Next, engage the safety if so equipped.

At this point your pistol is loaded, but your magazine is now one round shy of being full. Remove the magazine, holster your pistol, and top off the magazine with one cartridge. Now you can remove your pistol from the holster and insert the magazine again, producing a full combat load.



Hold the pistol magazine with your index finger along the front of the magazine.



Find the magazine well of the pistol with the index finger of your support hand and guide the magazine into the magazine well.



Grasp the slide with your support hand, fully retract it, and let it go.

To load a revolver, place the revolver in your support hand so that your social and ring fingers are wrapped around the cylinder. Depress the cylinder release with your shooting hand thumb and push the cylinder out of the frame with the same two fingers. You should now be holding the revolver by the cylinder, between the thumb and those fingers of your support hand. Either by inserting individual cartridges or by using a speed strip or a speed loader, load every chamber in the cylinder, close the cylinder, and holster the revolver. If you are a left-handed shooter, load a revolver as if you were shooting right-handed.



Regardless which hand you shoot with, hold the revolver in your left hand when loading, pinching the cylinder between your thumb and the social and ring fingers of your support hand.

Regardless which hand you shoot with, hold the revolver in your left hand when loading, pinching the cylinder between your thumb and the social and ring fingers of your support hand.

Unloading—With a pistol, you'll point the gun in a safe direction, with the safety engaged if so equipped, and remove the magazine. If the pistol's safety locks the slide in battery, it must be disengaged. Otherwise, leave the safety on, retract the slide in the same manner you used when loading the pistol, release it, and let it cycle back into battery. The cartridge that was in the chamber should have been ejected and fallen to the ground. Now, retract the slide and visually confirm that the chamber is empty. It's also a good idea to lock the slide to the rear and, using the pinky finger of your support hand, feel inside the chamber to manually confirm the pistol is unloaded. This is a good procedure to follow, especially when it's dark.

To unload a revolver, place the revolver in your support hand so that your social and ring fingers are wrapped around the cylinder. Depress the cylinder release with your shooting hand thumb and push the cylinder out of the frame with those same two fingers. You should now be holding the revolver by the cylinder, between the thumb and those same fingers on your support hand. Point the revolver up—vertically—and, using your right hand, slap the ejector rod at the front of the cylinder. This should cause the ejection of all fired and unfired cases from the cylinder. If you are a left-handed shooter, unload a revolver as if you were shooting right-handed.

Condition Check—A condition check is conducted to determine the status of a handgun, i.e., to see if it is loaded or unloaded.

With a pistol, retract the slide as done when loading, but only partially, just enough to determine if a cartridge is captive under the extractor. If no cartridge is seen or felt with your trigger finger, cycle the slide to load a cartridge from the magazine or conduct unloading procedures if required. If a cartridge is identified in the chamber and it is desirable that the pistol be loaded, release the slide, eject the

magazine into your support hand and verify its condition. With practice, both the chamber check and magazine check can be conducted by feel so that the condition of a pistol can be confirmed in total darkness or while your attention is directed elsewhere.



Condition check.

In a way, it's both easier and more difficult to check the condition of a revolver. Regardless, if you are trying to determine how many cartridges in the cylinder have not been fired, it is a visual exercise. Open the cylinder as when loading and visually determine if the cylinder chambers are loaded. If that is all you are trying to confirm you can do it by feel. If possible, visually determine if the cartridges in the chambers have been fired by looking at the primer for an indentation. Depending on your circumstance, you will have to decide on the condition the revolver should best be in, i.e., unloaded, partially loaded, or fully loaded. In darkness, or just to be double safe, use the thumb of your right hand to feel each chamber in the cylinder to confirm it is empty.

Lastly, we should further explain what Cooper meant by "Accuracy, Power and Speed." These are the three critical elements you must juggle to produce the desired result on target. If you miss, you cannot hope to stop the attacker. If you hit but your hits were slow in coming, you might stop your attacker, but it may be too late. And, if you do not hit your attacker with enough authority (power) it may not matter how fast or accurate you were.

Defining a minimum for each of these elements is almost impossible. In short, you should be accurate enough you can always hit what you need to. You cannot be too fast and, at least as far as defensive handguns go, you can never have enough power. Accepting these definitions, you are left with trying to find a balance of all three. The training exercises that follow will help you make some decisions about your abilities with your handgun, and even the type of handgun you should use. You will also learn how to practice to improve your skills.

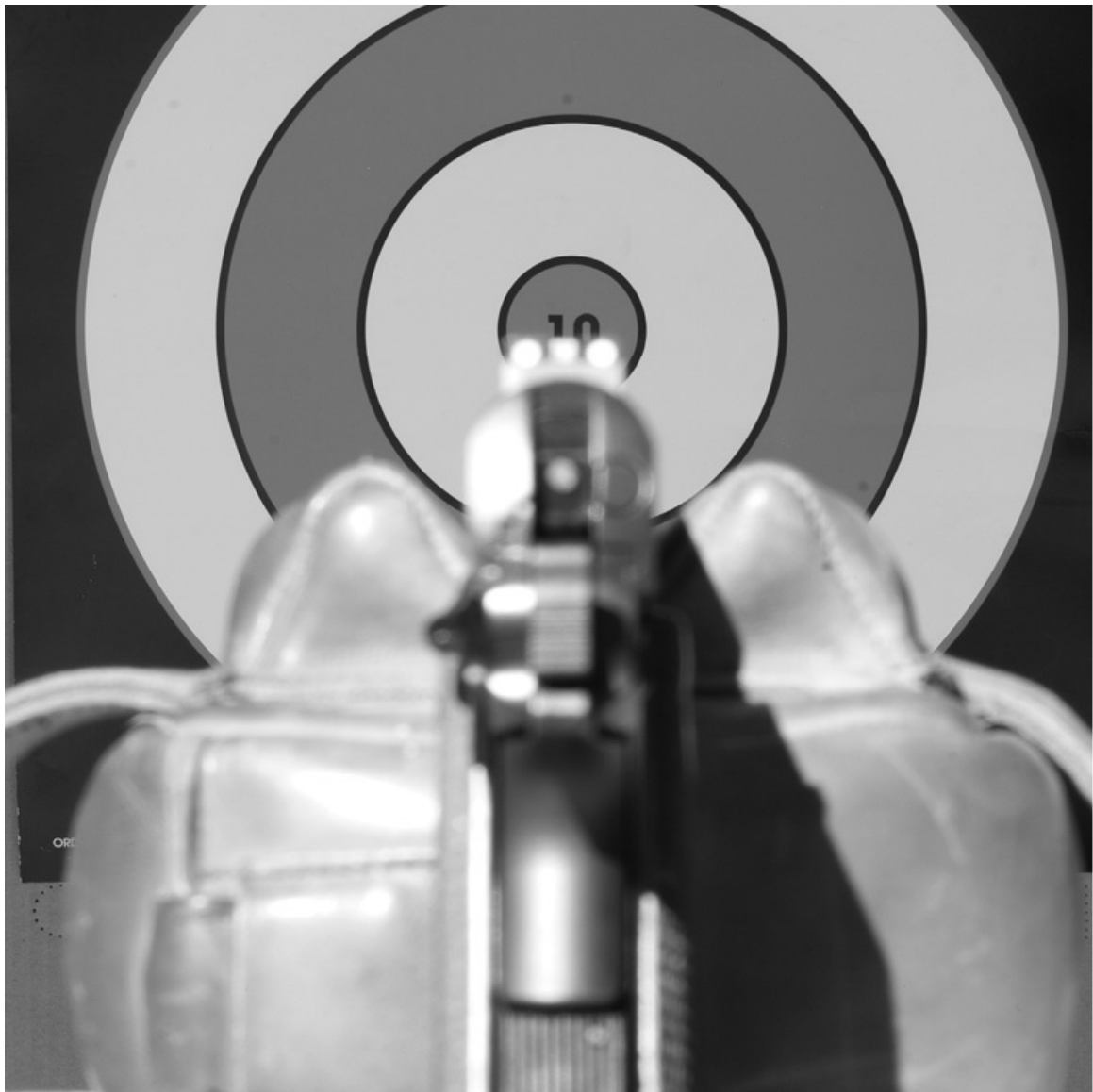
As stated in the introduction to this book, my intent is to integrate the modern handgun and tools like express sights, lasers, lights, and ammunition into the philosophy that has driven the art of the defensive handgun since Jeff Cooper first developed the Modern Technique. To become proficient in defending yourself with a handgun, all you must do is integrate the secret—sight alignment and trigger control—the principles of personal-defense, the Modern Technique of the Pistol, and a little common sense.

Chapter 6

Sights and Sight Picture

Using the sights to aim the gun gives you a means of verifying where the gun is pointed. To shoot without using the sights is to engage in guesswork. While it may be possible to shoot effectively at very close range, it still takes an enormous amount of practice for your hand and arm to learn to point the gun consistently in the direction your eyes are looking (a topic I will cover later). While a shooter with extensive practice will be able to hit at close range (say, under 10 yards), with reasonable consistency, for a beginner, the time required to learn to hit consistently at short range without sights will almost certainly be far greater than the time required to simply learn to use the sights correctly and quickly to get accurate, dependable results at ranges both near and far. Any sort of precise shooting requires the use of the sights and, with practice, their use can be so fast as to render moot any time difference between sighted and unsighted fire—the upside to sights is that, with their use, accuracy can be guaranteed as long as the shooter does his part.

The two most important components of sight use are to focus the eyes on the front sight and then verify the alignment between front and rear sights. The eyes can only focus in one distance plane at one point, and the front sight, rear sight, and target will all be at different distances from the eyes. The reason we pick the front sight as our focus object is that this little stub of metal tells us where the gun is aiming.



Incorrect sight focus. Note the blurry front and rear sights versus the sharply focused target. This is a common cause of inaccurate shooting.



Another form of incorrect focus. Note the blurry front sight and target versus the sharply focused rear sight. This also will cause inaccurate shooting.

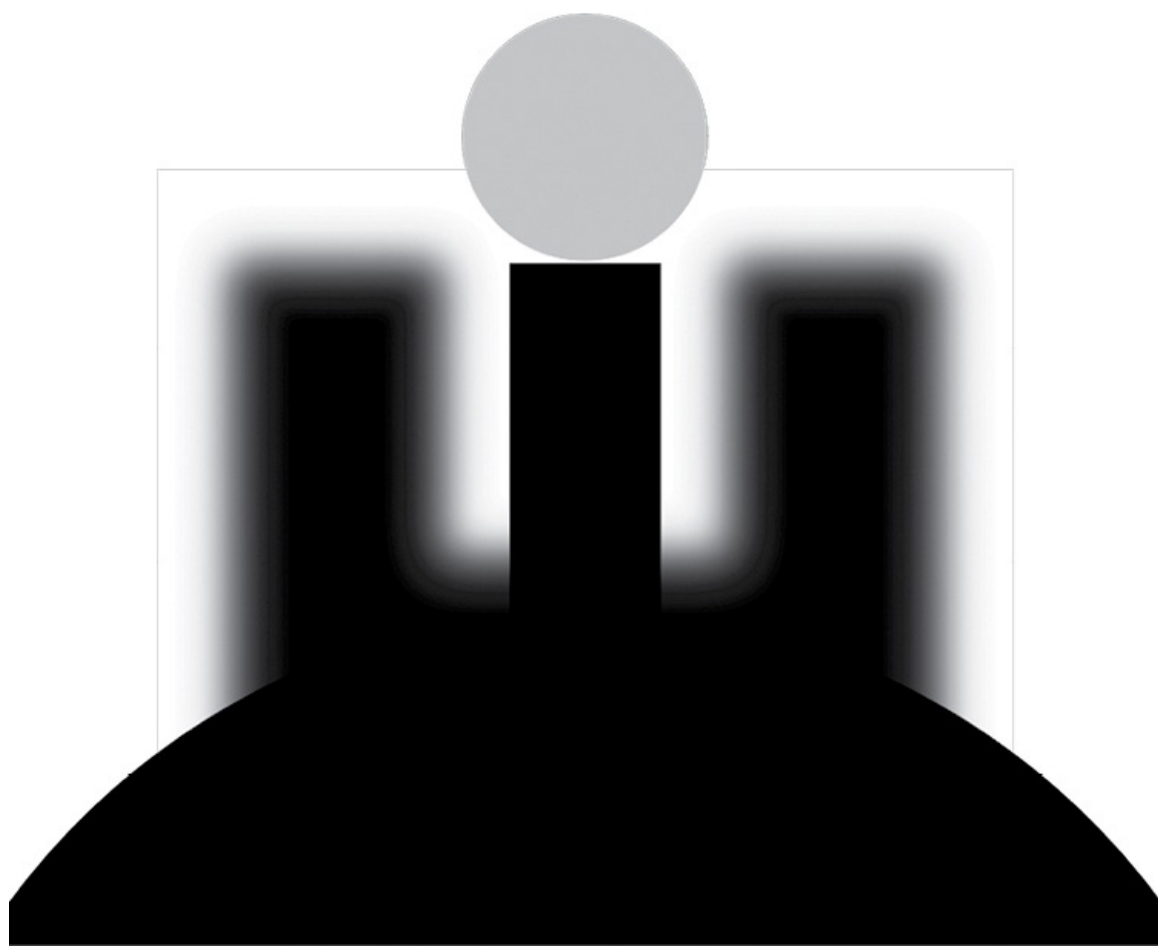


This is correct focus. Note the sharp front sight and blurry rear sight and target. This is what you must see for accurate shooting.

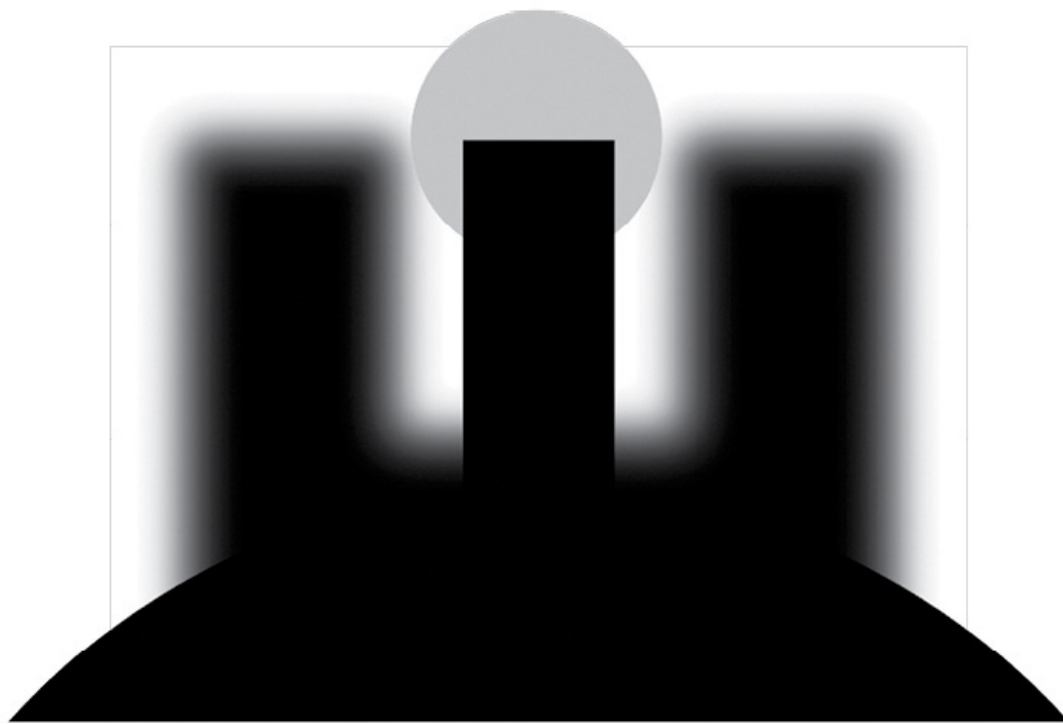
When we focus on the target, the front and rear sights will both be blurry. In this case, a small misalignment of the gun (which would be visible as sight misalignment) will not be noticed, and the gun will be looking along a different line of sight than our eyes are looking. It does not take much of an angular misalignment in the gun barrel versus our eyesight line for the shot to miss the target completely, and since this misalignment represents two diverging lines, the amount of error will grow rapidly with increasing distance to the target.

So, again, we focus on our front sight. This puts the target out of focus, just as it does the rear sights, but, in this case, it's not a drawback, since just about anything we will be shooting at with an iron-sighted pistol will be easy to see in general. Any error caused by aiming at a slightly blurry target will only be as big as the blurry edge of the target, which is actually a very small amount of space; truly, it is negligible, especially compared to the potential of the misalignment error allowed by not looking at your sights. So, we focus on the front sight and let the target blur slightly.

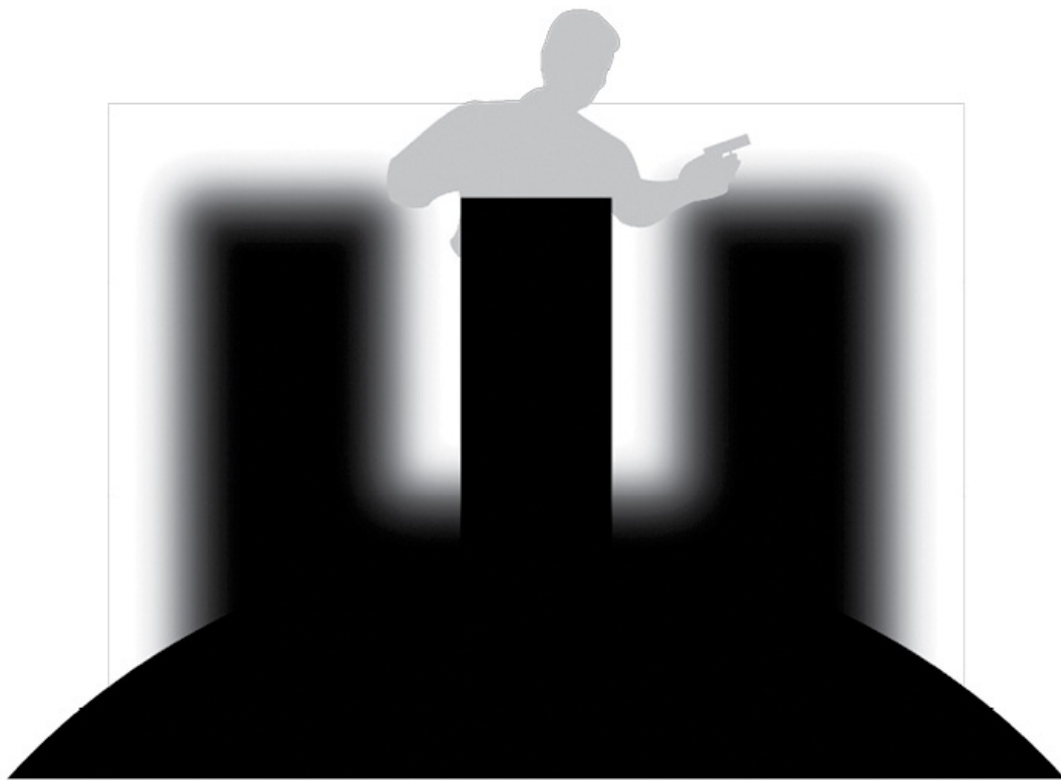
Now, how exactly do we use the sights to aim? First, we must create proper sight alignment. This is the line-up between the front and rear sights. With conventional pistol iron sights, we have a straight, square-topped post for a front sight, with a flat-topped rear sight blade that has a rectangular or square notch cut in its middle. The front sight post should be aligned in the rear sight notch so that the top flat surface of the front post is even with the top flat surface of the rear blade, and also centered side to side so that there is an even amount of space between the left side of the front post and left side of the rear notch, and the right side of the front post and right edge of the rear notch.



The six o'clock hold sight picture on a bull's-eye target. Focus on the center of the top edge of the front sight post. Let the target blur.



The center mass hold sight picture on the same bull's-eye target. Focus on the center top edge of the front post and let the target blur.



The center mass sight picture on the criminal trying to kill you. Focus on the center of the top edge of the front sight post. Let the target blur.

This is proper sight alignment. What your eyes should be focused on is the center of the top flat surface of the front sight post. It is this exact point that you use to place the sights on the desired impact point on the target. It is important to note that even a tiny, visible misalignment between front and rear sights actually represents a considerable angular misalignment of the gun barrel from our line of sight to the target. Thus, it is very important (especially if you are a beginner) to be a perfectionist in your sight alignment.

Proper sight alignment is achieved through your hands. As you will see later, training your hands to bring the handgun up into perfect sight alignment is one of the skills you must eventually master. This is extremely important. No one can hold a gun perfectly steady, but we must strive to eliminate error from our sight alignment. It is better to have the gun wobbling around a bit with the sights in excellent alignment with each other, than to have the gun seem steady but have the front sight off-center in the rear notch. The reason is that, if our sights are aligned on a wobbling gun, our shot will hit right where the tip of the front sight happens to be aiming at the instant of discharge. As long as we can keep our “wobble zone” in an area where we would like the bullet to hit, we can fire at any point in our wobbling. On the other hand, if our sights are in misalignment at the moment of discharge, the shot will hit a considerable distance from the point where the sights are superimposed on the target, because the gun is “looking” in a different direction than our eyes. At close range this doesn’t matter so much, but, at long ranges or on small targets, we need the most perfect alignment possible. It will be reiterated later, but get used to the notion right now of not firing a shot until you are satisfied with the sight alignment. Failure to follow this principle will result in poor accuracy.

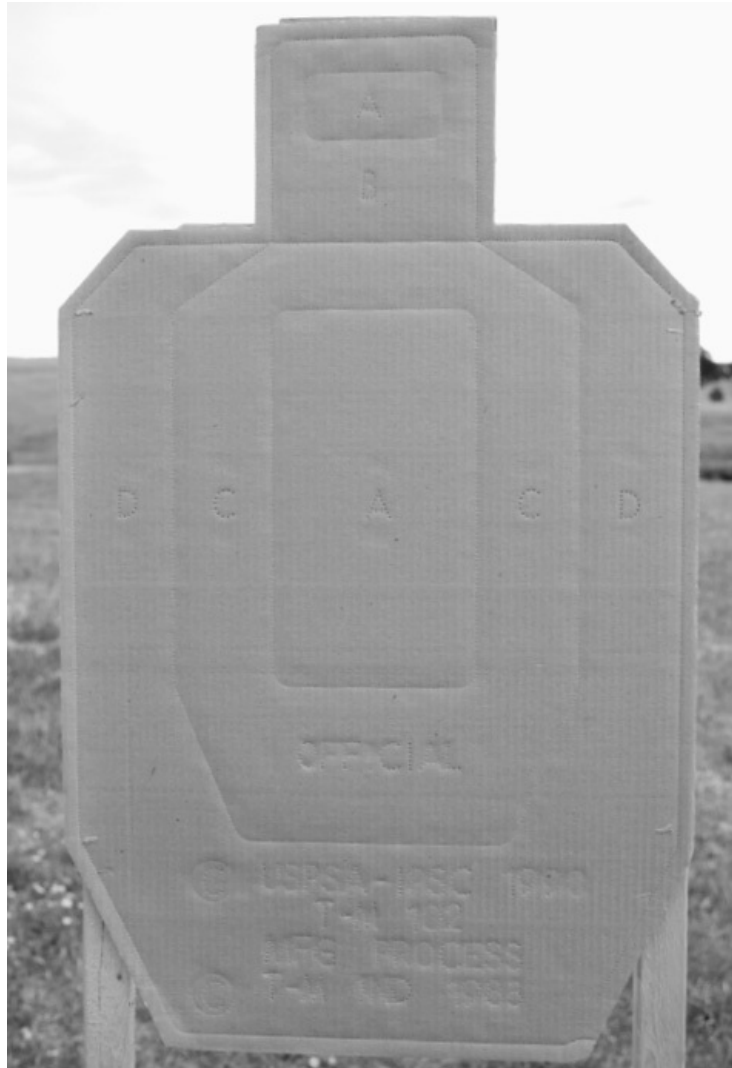
When we move this aligned package of front and rear sights onto the target and onto the point of the target we desire to hit (or desire to use as an aiming reference), we now have what is called a “sight picture.” Proper sight alignment is what your eyes see when the front and rear sights are aligned with

each other correctly, and sight picture is what your eyes see when this proper sight alignment is moved onto the target in the correct place to put the bullet where we want it.

There are two methods of aiming the sights against a target: one is “center mass,” whereby you aim the top of the front sight at the very center of the object you want to hit. The other is the “edge-of-mass” hold, also commonly referred to as the “six o’clock hold.” This second term stems from target shooters using round, black, bull’s-eye targets. They place the top of the front sight against the bottom edge of the round black bull’s-eye, so their sight picture looks like a black ball sitting on top of a black post. In this way they can clearly see the black front sight against the white of the rest of the target paper. Using the center mass hold on a bull’s-eye can sometimes make the black front sight disappear into the black of the bull’s-eye, so the six o’clock hold is often used instead and, in those cases, the gun’s sights are adjusted to hit above the front sight and into the center of the bull’s-eye. Again, great for target shooting, but, for purposes of hunting, recreational shooting, or defensive shooting, the center mass hold is preferred, because we can usually see the front sight quite plainly against the target, and so we are able to index the top of the front sight against the exact point we want the bullet to hit.

In practice, we often have difficulty with front sight focus, because the first thing we look at is the target—then, we bring the gun into our line of sight, but don’t shift focus back to our front sight. This shift of eye focus from target to front sight is one of the most important concepts in proper aiming, especially when we attempt speed. Remember to shift your focus from target to sights and always be looking at your front sight. This is supremely important.

Speaking of speed, one goal to work towards is to first achieve with the hands a near-perfect sight alignment with the target as quickly as possible, then visually acquire and judge the correctness of your sight picture as rapidly as can be done. At this point the mind says “good to go” to a good sight picture and commences the trigger squeeze, or says “not yet” to a bad sight picture and corrects it to good one before commencing the trigger squeeze. This combines two notions. The first is the “flash sight picture,” in which we recognize our sight picture and judge it in a bare instant. The second notion is that the sight picture is the boss, not the trigger finger. In other words, our sight picture is the go/no-go determinant of whether we fire the shot. No trigger pressure should be applied until our eyes have acquired the sight picture and our brain has approved it. This concept should be burned into the circuitry of your brain: The brain controls the trigger finger based on what the eyes see. This is the basic principle of accurate pistol shooting.



An IPSC competition cardboard target. You can see the different scoring areas, including those for “head”-zone hits.

At this point, one other necessary skill becomes possible: calling your shot. Unlike billiards, where you call the pocket where you intend to sink your ball, with firearms, we see where the sights are pointing at the instant of discharge, and this tells us where the shot has gone. If the gun wavered just a bit at that instant, we will see it and know where our shot should have impacted. Calling your shot helps you shoot more accurately in that you will know where every shot has landed without having to look at the target, and you will know that it was your motion of the gun rather than some other factor that was responsible.

One more detail to talk about is follow-through. Many people fire a shot and then immediately lower the gun to look at the target. Do not do this! Instead, keep your eyes on your sights, even as the gun is recoiling. Train yourself to see the full recoil cycle of the gun and its return to rest. If you are doing everything right, it will return to the exact same sight picture you had the instant before the gun fired. Work on maintaining front sight focus so that you see this sight picture recovery. You will not need to see the target to ascertain your hit, because by seeing your sight picture at the instant of discharge, you will already know where the shot went. Stay on your sights! This habit is what allows you to develop speed for successive hits and is very important.

Chapter 7

Proper Management of the Trigger

If there is one act in the simple process of firing a shot that causes us the most trouble, it will be the pressing of the trigger. Think about that. One merely has to view the gun's sights and verify proper alignment, press the trigger to discharge the piece, and the shot will go right where the gun is aimed. Simple as could be, right? Unfortunately, we humans tend to often make simple things complicated.

How do we avoid ruining a shot? First, let's take a look at what we need to do correctly, then we'll view what we do to foul up ourselves.



The strong-hand grip with the barrel and forearm aligned properly.

The Trigger Pull

The first thing to consider is the physical aspect of the trigger pull. Pressing the trigger results in an energy input into the gun. For instance, a pistol weighing two or 2½ pounds, may have a trigger pull anywhere from its own weight (say, the pull on a cocked Smith and Wesson revolver), on up to around 14 pounds (the double-action hammer-cocking pull on some semi-autos and revolvers). Obviously, exerting 12 or 14 pounds of trigger pull pressure on a two-pound pistol creates some issues, in terms of disrupting the ability to aim steadily.

First, let's consider firing a shot from a pistol with its hammer cocked, which requires no more than, say, 4½ pounds of finger pressure. How can we press the trigger with more force than the gun weighs, without causing the gun to move? The key here is to hold the pistol in the hand in such a way that our trigger finger sits comfortably on the trigger and can pull it straight to the rear, the same direction the mechanical motion of the trigger requires. In this action, we want to minimize any horizontal or vertical motions that may be imparted to the gun. The way to do this is to first grip the pistol so that its backstrap (the rear face of the grip frame) is centered in the web of the shooting hand between thumb and forefinger. The result of this is to align the barrel naturally with the long bones of the forearm.

Grip the gun as just described, with one hand only, and look down at your forearm and the gun. The barrel should not point to either side of a line running down the center of your forearm. (Realize that, when we progress to describing the two-handed grip, that will involve some bending of the wrists and the gun will no longer be aligned with the forearm bones in the shooting stance. This is okay, as long as the grip on the gun with the strong hand is correct as just described. Once the wrist bends in the two-handed stance, it will not affect the correct grip you have achieved on the gun.) This is the best grip with which to allow your trigger finger to pull straight to the rear without inadvertently pulling or pushing the gun to one side or another.

Next, try to place the center of the pad of the end of the finger on the trigger, rather than the very tip or the crease of the last joint. It is worth noting that the length of the finger versus the length of reach to the trigger may cause some variance here.

Hold the pistol as high up on the grip as you can. For a revolver, the top of the hand should be about even with the top of the stock. For semi-autos, cram your hand as far up against the rear tang of the grip as it will go; no space should appear between the top of your hand and the bottom of the tang. This helps mitigate muzzle jump during recoil, due to your hand being closer to the axis of that recoil (which is along the barrel).

Once you've established the correct alignment in your grip, relax the grip of the gun hand. Beginners often death-grip the pistol. But a tight gun hand prevents the trigger finger from moving rapidly, which keeps us from being able to gain speed in our shooting. In reality, you should have no more tension in your gun grip than that used when having a slightly firm handshake with a woman. The bone-crushing John Wayne grip is a no-no. The reason for this is that, when your hand is that tight, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to allow the trigger finger to flex independently from the rest of the hand.

This independent operation is crucial. Without it, the entire hand has a tendency to squeeze when pulling the trigger, which will move the gun a considerable amount; for a right-hander, this will often result in a shot low and to the left of the aiming point (the opposite, of course, for a left-handed shooter). We want to eliminate all motion of the gun while pulling the trigger, and the gripping techniques described here, including the gentle, non-violent pressure straight rearwards as applied by the fingertip, are the methods that best accomplish this.

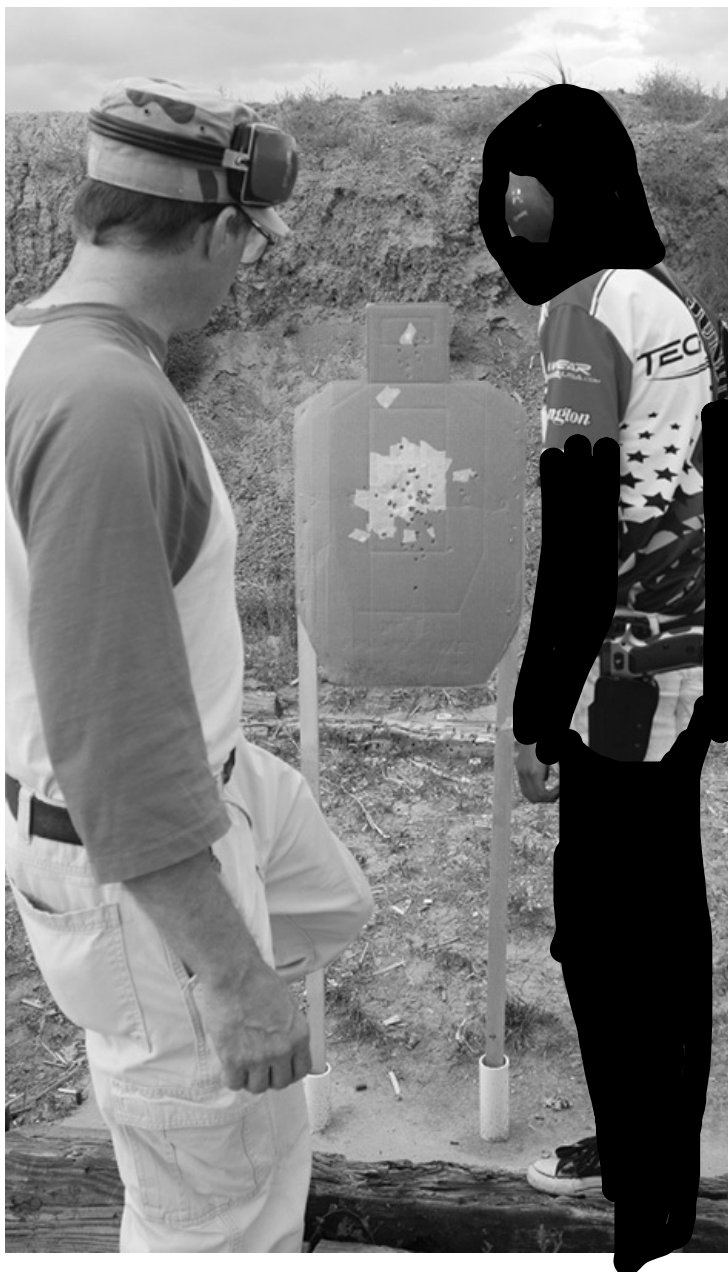
Mindset and the Surprise Break

The action of the mind has the greatest effect of all. Ideally, you want a relaxed, calm, and empty mind when firing the shot. The only thought you should have is one of admiration for your sight picture. It is preferable to have no conscious thought of the act of pressing the trigger, or of wishing or expecting the shot to fire. If you believe that your only job is to aim, and that someone else will pull the trigger for you, you'll be on the right track.

Why this kind of "disembodied" mindset? Because the three greatest impediments to firing a clean shot are the push of the hand against the gun in anticipation of recoil as the trigger press starts; a perceived need to force the shot, when a wobbling gun presents a perfect sight picture for an instant; or an impatient desire to force the shot, even if the sight picture is incorrect. The emotional baggage we bring to the act of shooting—fear, nervousness, excitement, ego, pride, impatience, etc.—clutter our ability to perform the simplest physical act of moving our fingertip a sixteenth of an inch. It is imperative you learn to empty your mind of any thought or emotion beyond simply focusing on your sight picture.

Flinching

The single greatest impediment to fast and accurate shooting, in my opinion, is the anticipation of and premature reaction to recoil. This is known as a "flinching." This happens when, as soon as we press on the trigger to discharge the shot, our subconscious mind, anticipating the recoil to come, starts our hand dipping downward to counteract it. Our subconscious knows that the recoil impulse arrives pursuant to the press of the finger. The result is that the shot goes low. If the whole hand clenches convulsively at the same time, the shot will often go to the side, as well, usually left for a right-hander.



Low shots indicate a flinch. This can show up late in the practice session from shooter fatigue.

Further complicating the problem, since the flinch reflex almost always includes an eye blink, we do not see our sights dipping in the instance before the shot fires. This is probably the biggest problem encountered by people shooting a centerfire pistol with any appreciable recoil, and it is a difficult habit to break. Even a shooter with proper trigger control will often start flinching eventually, after firing enough rounds to become either fatigued or over-sensitive to the recoil pulse. If this happens to you, take a break or end the session.

The best method I have seen for eliminating the flinch is to not allow the subconscious mind to know exactly when the piece will discharge. This method is called the “surprise break.” Simply put, you’ll pull the trigger gradually enough so that the exact instant of firing comes as a surprise to you. Your subconscious cannot direct a flinch action, then, because we don’t know just when the gun will fire.

To effect the surprise break, we must first start with a fairly slow trigger pull, one that takes place over a period of several seconds. With time and practice, this interval will be shortened more and more until you have a fairly quick trigger motion, even though your mind will have been trained to still sense the time interval involved and still not know the exact instant of discharge. This requires constant practice to achieve, but, eventually, you can fire shots in fractions of a second. The mind will have been trained to consider that even such a short time interval carries in it the uncertainty of when the shot will fire, and the flinch action will be kept at bay.

How do you know if you're not flinching? If you see your muzzle flash or see your front sight lifting in recoil, you can be pretty sure you are not flinching. Either visual will allow you to call your shot in your own mind, and without viewing the actual hits on the target.



A father pressing the trigger for his daughter to eliminate shooter flinch. He is also able to check for her accuracy of aiming this way.

The counterpoint to all this is the yanking, mashing, and jerking of the trigger. Not only does this impart a violent physical impulse to the gun, it is also a prime enabler of the flinch. A desire to force speed causes this problem. That desire, or impatience, comes from an inability to hold the sight alignment on the desired target aim point. The gun weaves all around and, when the sights cross the aiming point, there may be an overwhelming desire to yank the trigger at just that instant. Don't do it! Instead, consider this alternate method.

Every time the sights cross your desired aiming point, add a little pressure to the trigger, maybe a half-pound at most, and not enough to fire the gun. When the sights weave off your aiming point, stop adding pressure, but continue to hold the pressure you already have, rather than releasing it. When the gun weaves back to your aim point, add a few more ounces. Maintain this schedule, and, at some point, the gun will fire as you add the last few needed ounces while the sights are lined up. It will be a surprise, and it will happen only when the sights are on the desired point of aim.

One other aspect of trigger control deals with the motion of the finger after the shot is fired. Ideally, you should let the trigger finger forward only enough to allow the trigger mechanism to reset itself. The finger should stay in contact with the surface of the trigger, not move forwards off of it. In this manner, the motion of the trigger finger is minimized. Also, try not to fling your finger all the way forwards, off the trigger and to the front of the trigger guard. This is pointless, unnecessary, and wastes both time and motion.

The best results are obtained when all the above tactics are combined. The proper grip on the pistol, proper placement of the finger pad on the trigger, the relaxation of the trigger hand, the independent and proper motion of the trigger finger, the relaxation of the mind, and the surprise break all work together to produce a firing action that will not disturb your perfect sight picture at the moment of discharge.

From a safety standpoint, the trigger finger should be clear of the trigger and held straight outside the trigger guard at all times until the sights are aligned on the target (Rule 3). When we retract or lower the gun from the aiming position to the ready position, we move our trigger finger off the trigger. If we're shooting a pistol with a manual safety, like the 1911, we also thumb the safety to the "on" position at this time. If another shot is to be taken, keep both hands on the gun in the proper grip and bring it back to the mid-chest position with the barrel pointed downrange and slightly toward the ground. When extending the gun for the next shot, that is the time that the safety is disengaged, hammer cocked, etc., as the gun first starts moving upwards and outwards, so you are ready to shoot by the time the gun is brought into your line of sight. (Proper movement of the gun from either the holster or the ready position to the aiming position and back will be fully covered in following chapters.)

With a hammer-cocking trigger pull, such as that on a double-action revolver or semi-auto, we need to be able to exert considerable force through nearly an inch of motion. This unavoidably imparts motion to the gun, making this technique largely unsuitable for a very precise shot and much more difficult to master. There are ways, however.

First, we need to train and strengthen the trigger finger to perform this long hard pull with minimum disturbance to the gun. A high volume of dry-fire practice can accomplish this.

Second, there are two ways to deal with the pull. You can have either a long, steady, continuous pull until the hammer drops, or it can be a "staged" pull. The staged pull brings the finger about three-quarters of the way back, or to the point just before the hammer is released. There the finger pauses for an instant, while the shooter steadies the gun and verifies the sight picture. At this point, the small remaining part of the pull is applied, which has minimal effect on the sight picture. With a great deal of practice, staging can be done at a speed almost as fast as that with a straight-through pull.

Trigger mastery requires a great deal of attentiveness to the details just presented, and a great deal of practice. Fortunately, much of this practice can be done simply through dry-fire practice, which is "firing" an empty, unloaded gun. In this kind of practice, you go through all the mechanics of firing a shot, but, of course, you'll hear only a click instead of a bang. (Make absolutely sure your gun is unloaded, including chambers and magazines, perform your practice in the safest possible direction within your domicile, and don't keep live ammo in the same room in which you're practicing.) There are lots of benefits to dry-fire practice; there's no noise, no recoil, no distractions, no emotional baggage, no motivation to flinch. A high volume of dry-fire, especially by a beginner, will make an enormous difference in skill acquisition.

Eventually, you will reach the point of having a totally subconscious trigger pull reflex, in which seeing the correct sight picture for the shot will cause your trigger finger to fire the gun without any conscious thought process, an act that will occur literally faster than you can consciously think about it. This is what enables shot-to-shot split times—the time span in between shots—to get down to around 2/10-second, sometimes even faster, among accomplished competitive shooters.

Breathing

Ideally, you should hold your breath when firing. The motion of breathing imparts motion to the gun. There is some evidence that holding your breath after exhaling results in greater steadiness, and doing so also follows the natural cycle of your unconscious breathing, so it is something you can do without much thought or disruption of your natural breathing habit. This is how shooting accurately with a rifle is accomplished. At first this will be difficult, especially if you are taking extra time to aim and develop a slow trigger pull to maintain the surprise break. You should also be aware that holding your breath for more than about eight seconds will start to degrade your eyesight and physical performance. If you run out of air on a shot, don't rush the shot. Instead, lower the gun, breathe regularly again, and start over. If you must breathe with the gun extended in the firing position, do so from your lower abdomen, not your upper chest, as this will impart less motion to the gun.

Eventually, your speed will be great enough that the handgun can be raised, aimed, and fired within a second or so. At that point, simply pausing your breathing motion for that second is easily accomplished.

Chapter 8

The Draw

Assuming we carry a handgun for self-defense, we might find ourselves in a situation that requires its usage in a hurry. Failure to perform quickly in such situations can cost us our lives. With this in mind, the gun carrier needs to develop a smooth and efficient draw stroke, one that incorporates a good and proper strong-hand grip on the gun at first touch, a smooth motion to clear the holster, and an efficient movement of the gun into our line of sight so that a sight picture can be acquired as quickly as possible.

There are various approaches to drawing, including short motions that bring the gun barely out of the holster for use in engaging targets at arm's length or less. There are also many different ways to position a holster. For simplicity's sake, I will concentrate on the basic draw motion from a strong-side belt holster, a draw that brings the gun to eye level for sight acquisition, using the two-hand hold as previously described. This gives us the greatest odds for firing accurately in a short time period. Remember, a fast miss solves nothing and merely gives our opponent a better chance to shoot us first.

The shortest distance between two points is a straight line, so one would think that motion of the gun in a straight line from the holster to the extended position might be the best. However, such a movement doesn't allow us to see our sights until the gun has reached that extended point. What we really want is not speed of the gun from the holster to the extended position, but rather speed from the holster to our line of sight.

To do this, we want to bring the gun from the holster upwards in a fairly steep line, so as to place the gun in our sight line and fairly close to our face in as little time as possible. This is the "straight line" we are concerned with, not the one from the gun's muzzle to the target. Once the gun's sights are in your sight line, you'll transfer your focus to the sights and then drive the gun forwards along that sight line and out to the fully extended position; you will remain focused on your sights throughout the extension. This allows for the correction of any errors in the sight picture at the earliest possible time and also permits us to reach the extended position ready to fire the shot (or even before that, if necessary), having already formed the correct flash sight picture.



This is where you start, when practicing drawing from a holster. Relax! Keep your arms, hands, and fingers loose. Your feet are shoulder width apart, your upper body upright. Everything is balanced.



Strong hand gripping the gun, weak hand in the grab position, shown from the front. Note the hands move together to grip and grab.



Strong hand gripping the gun, weak hand in grab position, shown from right.



Clear the holster. Note the straight trigger finger at this stage of the presentation.



Rotate the muzzle downrange and bring the gun toward the support hand, form your complete grip, and disengage the safety (if necessary).



Raise your gun up to eyesight line, close in to the face and with a high trigger-side elbow. Shift your focus to the front sight and form your flash sight picture.



Extend your arms fully, maintaining your focus on the flash sight picture.

Refining the draw in this manner enables firing at a very close target before the gun is fully extended, but while still having a sight picture. This technique is taught by Kelly McCann in his *Crucible* video training series. He recommends keeping the strong-side elbow high (upper arm staying as horizontal to the ground as possible), as the gun is brought to the line of sight and as it starts moving forwards. Letting your strong-side elbow droop during the draw stroke causes your arm and the gun to droop out of your sight line.

Out of the Holster

One of the first actions in the draw is to move both hands simultaneously. The gun (trigger-pulling) hand must grip the gun in the same manner you will use to shoot it as soon as you grasp the gun in the holster. There will be no time to change your grip during the draw and presentation, so it is absolutely necessary to achieve a proper firing grip at first touch. This takes quite a bit of practice, but its importance cannot be overlooked. Get your hand on the gun butt in the correct firing grip.

It is probably best to have your hand approach the gun butt from above, rather than from the side, to effect the centering of the butt in the web of your hand. Make sure that your trigger finger is straight along the outside of the holster over the trigger guard! The firing hand thumb, after popping any thumbsnap strap your holster may have, should be “flagged” or sticking up in the hitchhiker position.

This keeps it from accidentally nudging off the safety on a cocked and locked 1911-style pistol while the gun's still in the holster and also keeps it from getting fouled on any straps or snaps in the way. If your holster has a thumbsnap strap, your hand should come straight down onto the top of the gun butt with the thumb flagged but pointing forwards slightly. In this manner, it will pop the snap as you achieve your grip.

If your holster has an outside snap strap, rather than one topside, you will have to release it with the outside or leading edge of the base of the trigger finger while sweeping your hand upwards along the outside of the holster. Then the hand rises slightly above the gun butt and drops straight down onto it.

The position of your holster may require certain other specific positioning of your drawing hand. If the holster is a strong-side, high-ride, behind-the-hip concealment belt holster, the gun will be positioned high and around toward your back somewhat. You may have to raise up your gun-side shoulder and rotate your hand towards the gun butt to get a proper firing grip, such that your palm is more facing your kidney (where the gun butt is). To effect a proper grip in this case, you'll have to have your flagged thumb point out to the side, rather than forwards.

Remember, you must achieve the proper firing grip on the gun butt the first time. Apply this grip while the gun is in the holster and then analyze just how your arm, hand, and shoulder have to be positioned to apply it correctly. This is what you will practice to achieve, every time you draw. If you mess it up, it will ruin the entire process all the way through the shot, as an incorrect grip will both cause misalignment of the gun in the firing position and defeat the eventual, repetition-ingrained, correct muscle memory that produces the instantaneous and automatic alignment of the gun in a high-speed presentation.

What's your non-shooting hand doing at this time? The support hand moves at the same time as the gun hand. As the latter reaches for the gun, the former moves across the body to a position just under the strong-side pectoral muscle. The inside of your support forearm should be horizontal across your chest. The wrist should be bent with the palm facing sideways to the strong side, and the hand canted downward with the thumb extended straight ahead and the fingers pointing as nearly straight downwards to the ground as possible. When the draw motion starts, it should look like there is a string tied between both wrists—the hands move together. The support hand ends up in a place that is along the path of the gun as it comes up from and out of the holster and towards the line of sight. This position is called the "grab."

As your hands are moving into the grip (gun hand) and grab (support hand) positions, you should assume your shooting posture as related in the chapter on the Modern Isosceles stance. Bend your knees slightly, stick your fanny out slightly, and lean your upper body slightly towards the target. If your feet started out in an awkward position, move them so they are about shoulder-width apart and with the trigger hand-sided foot to the rear. All these movements should be done simultaneously with your hand motions. By the time your hands are in the grip and grab positions, your body should be in the position from which you will shoot. No further body movement (besides the arms) should need to take place after this point. In other words, don't bob and weave back and forth as you bring the gun out of the holster to the shooting position.

Draw the gun out of the holster in line with the angle at which the holster holds the gun. Any other angle or any twisting or other motion will cause the gun to bind in the holster. Keep in mind that, with a high-ride holster, you will probably need to raise your strong-side shoulder up pretty high as well, to help your arm move enough get the gun all the way out of the holster. Try to keep your gun-arm elbow pointing rearwards, as opposed to letting it swing out to the side. This helps align your hand with the gun butt and also prevents wasted motion. Also, as mentioned before, keep the strong-side elbow high as the gun comes up to our line of sight, to avoid a lowered elbow pulling the rest of the arm (and gun) downwards with it.

As the gun comes up towards your support hand, the gun should be rotated muzzle-downrange just before it intercepts the support hand. For a 1911-style gun, your thumb should be on top of the safety (but not disengaging it) as the pistol clears the holster. As the muzzle gets pointed downrange, now you can disengage the manual safety if your gun has one. For a 1911-style, your thumb should stay up on top of the manual safety lever as part of your normal firing grip.

Make sure the support hand does not present itself in front of the path of the muzzle as you draw the gun and orient it downrange. To do so is called "sweeping." Use the gun and strong hand to sort of

scoop up the support hand from its position in front of your chest.

Another thing not to do? Do not reach out with both hands separately and “clap” them out in front of you. This takes too long and causes the gun to wobble when your hands come together. Bring the gun through the support hand position, get your correct support hand grip as described in the Modern Isosceles section, and continue raising the gun up towards your jawline.

At this point, with a proper two-handed grip but before you begin extending your arms, your trigger finger should still be off the trigger and straight along the side of the gun. This is almost identical to the ready position described previously, except the gun starts from the strong side of the body and has to move across your body to your centerline. At this time you should also be looking at the exact spot on your target you want the bullet to hit. Now, drive the gun upwards and slightly forwards fully into your line of sight, so that your sights become superimposed on your target. Do not make an upwards or downwards arc with the gun throughout this process; you are not bowling or casting a fishing line. The idea is to move the gun quickly straight up into your line of sight and then smoothly straight forwards towards the target.

If you have a double-action (trigger-cocking) semi-auto or revolver, you may start trigger pressure to bring the hammer partway back once you see your sights. Teach yourself a slow, partial trigger pull here so as not to fire the pistol prematurely.

Now for the crucial ingredient. As the gun sights come into your line of sight, transfer your focus to the front sight and let the target blur slightly. This is of the utmost importance. The faster you see your sights, the faster you can verify your aim. If you are using a pistol like a 1911 semi-auto in Condition One (cocked-hammer), you may place your finger gently on the trigger at this time. Now you begin checking the alignment of your sights as you move the gun forward to the fully extended arms position.

Do not wait for the gun to be fully extended before focusing on your sights! This defeats the purpose of bringing the gun up into your line of sight close to your face. Use the time this technique gives you to get a head start on your aiming.



Once the grip is established the shooter rotates the muzzle downrange.



Raising up the gun and beginning to extend it forward.



Finally, the gun fully extended and at eye level. Find your flash sight picture and press the trigger.

It's important for you to realize that, before your arms reach full extension, you have the ability to fire a coarsely aimed shot at a very close target, say within three yards, very quickly and with some

notion of what your sight alignment is. By the time you reach full extension of the arms, you should already have a good sight picture and be able to fire the instant your arms cease motion on most shots that do not require extreme precision.

Re-holstering

Holstering the gun occurs as the reverse of the above motions. Think of it as running a movie backwards. The finger comes off the trigger as your two-handed grip moves the gun back towards your chest. The safety, if there is one, is reengaged and, as the gun rotates down towards the holster, the support forearm goes horizontal across your chest, its support hand parked at the “grab” position where it was first picked up by the gun. You should learn to re-holster without looking at the holster. Keep your eyes on the target (you may need to change your mind about re-holstering in a real-world situation!). You should also resist the urge to reach down and hold the holster with the support hand, as you will end up sweeping the gun muzzle across your support hand fingers.

Once the gun is holstered, run your fingers between the gun and your shirt, to make sure a fold of fabric has not been jammed down into the holster between the leather and gun. During this entire process, maintain your body’s shooting posture (knees bent, fanny out, shoulders rounded towards the target), until the gun is holstered. Only once the gun is secured in the leather should you assume a normal posture.

Concealed Guns

If you are going to carry concealed, you will need to clear your covering garment away from the handgun before you can grip the gun.

For sweeping aside an open jacket or coat, have the fingertips of your drawing hand raking across your shirt as you flip the garment open. Your hand should sweep the garment away and up to the pistol butt so you have clear access. Experiment with differing cover garments, as some will move aside in a satisfactory manner, while others will tend to cling to your shirt requiring a much slower “peeling” action.

For a non-opening, pullover type garment, grab the hem of the garment with both hands on either side of the hip holster and yank it far enough upwards to give several inches of clearance above the gun butt. It should go without saying that you do not want to be grabbing a handful of clothing wrapped around the gun butt.

The key to a quick draw is not forced speed, but, instead, a smooth, efficient movement without wasted motion. The technique is very simple, minimal, and direct, so resist the urge to make it more complicated than it needs to be. Slow makes smooth, and smooth makes fast.

Chapter 9

Reloading Drills

Reloads are procedures by which a shooter is able to replenish the weapon with ammunition either during a gun fight or during a lull in that fight. The need for reloading can be either immediate or a matter of choice, depending on the circumstances.

There are three types of reloads: Emergency, Tactical, and Administrative.

Emergency Reload

In an emergency reload, you have fired the weapon empty to slide lock and must now reload.

Upon realizing that the weapon is empty, reach for a fresh magazine in your magazine pouch. Punch out the empty magazine as you move the open end of the magazine to the magazine well.



Reach for a full magazine.



Punch out the empty magazine.

Briskly and firmly insert the magazine into the magazine well. Release the slide stop, or pull back slightly on the slide and release it, to recharge the weapon; point in assess; and fire, if necessary.

Tactical Reload

The tactical reload is reloading the weapon when you want to top off the firearm before you have fired it empty. It is normally done during a lull in the gunfight when there is no danger of putting yourself at risk of being shot. To perform a tactical reload:

Bring the gun to your midsection while securing a fresh magazine from the magazine pouch with your support-side hand.



Retrieve a fully-loaded magazine from the pouch.



Bring the magazine close to the magazine well.

Firmly seat the fresh magazine. Stow the ejected magazine in you pouch or pocket. (There is no need to fully rack the slide since there is already a round in the chamber).

Administrative Reload

This is the simple loading procedure. It is normally performed at the start of a firing exercise.

Chapter 10

Gentlemen (and Ladies) Choose Your Weapons

One can't carry a concealed weapon without having a concealable weapon. Some are suitable for the concealed carry task, and some are not.



(L) S&W Bodyguard (M/649) with shrouded hammer, DA/SA. (Center) factory bobbed hammer on DAO Ruger SP101. (R) "hammerless" configuration of DAO S&W Centennial (M/40-1).

We can't cover every possible choice here. A swing through the Krause catalog will show you whole books on the 1911, the Glock, the SIG-Sauer, the Beretta, the Smith & Wesson series, etc. al. Other good choices from Paladin include *Living with 1911s* and *Living with Glocks* by Robert Boatman, and the outstanding *The Snubby Revolver* by Ed Lovette. I think Lovette's book should be read by anyone who owns or is thinking of owning a "snub-nose." It puts the whole genre in perspective.

As noted earlier, it's more convenient to have a "wardrobe" of concealable handguns, but it's not entirely necessary. Generations of young cops have learned that it's cheaper to buy a concealment holster for their full-size department-issue service handgun than to purchase a whole new gun and leather set for off-duty carry. Similarly, many armed citizens have learned that the full-size handgun they bought for home protection is concealable if they set their mind to it.



The competent shooter loses little going double-action-only with a snubby. This old M/36 Chief Special with Herrett stocks made 5 out of 5 head shots at 20 yards single action (left) and double action (right).

Cops have picked up on this, too. In 1967, Ordnance Sgt Louis Seman of the Illinois State Police convinced the ISP to become the first large department in the nation to adopt the Smith & Wesson Model 39 9mm semiautomatic pistol as a duty weapon. The reason was not firepower. At the time, troopers were required to be armed off duty. They carried 4- to 6-inch barrel Colt and Smith & Wesson service revolvers in uniform, and generally wore 2-inch barrel small frame 38 versions of the same guns on their own time. At qualification, the “snubby” scores were dismally inferior to those with the larger revolvers. Seman reasoned, correctly, that the Model 39 auto pistol would be light and flat enough for concealed carry, but would do fine for uniform wear as well. He was proven right: scores skyrocketed, and the troopers became comfortable wearing the slim Smith 9mms on their off-time. More recently, when NYPD went with 16-shot 9mm pistols and gave their officers the choice of the SIG P226 DAO, the heavy S&W Model 5946, or the polymer-frame Glock 19, the overwhelming majority chose the latter. This was partly because the Glock 19 was cheaper (NYPD officers buy their own guns through the department), but also because it was much lighter and the only one of the three options that was truly a “compact.” The G19 was easier to carry all the time off duty, or when transferring to a plainclothes assignment.



Cocked to single action as shown, this S&W 649 can be a problem waiting to happen in a tactical situation. Author prefers double-action-only (DAO) S&Ws.

Just as hunters and sportsmen have historically modeled their rifle choices on the nation's military small arms, America's armed citizens have historically followed the police establishment in choosing defensive handguns. When most of America's cops carried 38 Special revolvers to work, that same type and caliber was the most popular choice of home defense and concealed carry gun. Though private gun enthusiasts embraced auto pistols before American law enforcement in general, they did not switch to autoloaders en masse until the police did the same. Today, the snub-nose "detective special" genre remains extremely popular among cops for backup and off-duty wear, and the same style gun is very popular among armed citizens, but both tend toward the autoloader as a rule for full size "heavy duty" handguns.

Let's take just a cursory look at available choices today. In each weapon type, various sizes and calibers are available. This allows armed citizen and cop alike to have a deep concealment gun, a larger handgun that's concealable under heavier clothing, and perhaps a still larger one for home defense or target practice, all with the same fire controls and general "feel" for commonality of training and habituation, so that skills developed with the one will transfer to the other. With some (but not all) combinations, one can also use the larger gun's speedloaders or higher capacity magazines for efficient spare ammo recharging with the smaller gun.

The New Paradigm "Automatics"

The proper term is considered to be "semiautomatic," but for my generation "automatic" was an acceptable descriptor of autoloading pistols which only fired one shot per pull of the trigger, so forgive me if I use it in this book for convenience. We all know what we're talking about.



Today's new paradigm: polymer-framed, striker-fired autos. From top: Glock 22 in 40, S&W M&P in 9mm, Springfield XD Tactical in 45 GAP, 45 ACP Kahr P45, 40 cal. Taurus 24/7, and 9mm Ruger SR9.

The most popular genre of automatics today are striker-fired pistols with no “hammers” per se, and with polymer frames. Pioneered by Heckler and Koch with the VP70Z and HKP9 series pistols of the 1970s and '80s – but popularized more than 20 years ago by the market-leading Glock brand – the polymer frame reduces weight, reduces cost, and is impervious to corrosion. The latter is an important point with guns carried concealed and often exposed to salty, rust-creating human sweat. Most of these pistols will have a trigger pull that's the same from first to last shot, which makes them easier to learn to shoot well. These include the Glock, of course, and also the Springfield Armory XD, the Kahr, Smith & Wesson's successful Military & Police series and cost-effective Sigma line, and the slim, reliable Ruger

SR9 among others. The Glock line is far and away the most popular in American police service at this writing, but the S&W M&P is coming on strong in that sector and so, to a lesser degree, is the XD.

Double-action semiautomatics can be had with polymer frames (Beretta Ninety-Two and Px4, the current HK series, SIG P-250 and SIG-Pro, Ruger P95 9mm and P345 45, for example). These require a long, heavy (read “deliberate”) pull of the trigger for the first shot, and are considered by some to be less prone to stress-induced accidental discharges for that reason. They can be ordered DAO (double-action-only, with that same heavy pull for every shot, such as the popular Kel-Tec series), or TDA (traditional double action) in which the pistol cocks itself to an easy, light pull for every shot after the first. The latter will be fitted with a decocking lever to safely lower the hammer when the shooting is done. Of course, the same companies – plus Smith & Wesson and many more – offer double-action autos with steel or aluminum frame construction, too.

A classic favorite among American shooters is the single action semiautomatic, typified by the 1911 pistol that has been popular since the eponymous year of its introduction. To be ready for immediate, reactive self-defense, the 1911 type handgun has to be carried cocked and locked (hammer back, thumb safety in the “safe” position) with a live round in the chamber. This alarms some people not in tune with the tradition, and there is no shame for those people to simply go to a double action or striker-fired handgun instead. The 1911 was popular for concealed carry from the beginning because it is extremely thin for a gun of its power level, and is therefore very comfortable to wear inside the waistband or even in a shoulder holster. The most popular chambering is the one this gun was designed around, the 45 ACP (Automatic Colt Pistol), but enthusiasts have bought them in 38 Super, 9mm, 10mm, and other chamberings. The 1911 was designed by firearms genius John Moses Browning, who before his death did the initial design work on another famous weapon that bears his name, the Browning Hi-Power. Even slimmer, and capable of holding 14 rounds of 9mm Parabellum, this high quality weapon has something of a cult following in the CCW world.



Two approaches to making 1911's butt less protuberant in concealment. Top: shortened Officer's frame on Colt CCO. Center: "Bobtail" configuration developed by Ed Brown, shown on his Executive model pistol. Bottom: standard size 1911 frame for reference, here a Smith SW1911. All 3 are 45 ACP.

Revolvers have earned a reputation for good reliability and have been around since the year 1836. A swing-out cylinder double action design is the easiest handgun for new shooters because of its simple "administrative handling," the routine loading and unloading, checking, and cleaning that accompanies all responsible firearms ownership. Its "manual of arms," i.e., its physical operation, is without parallel for simplicity. This is one reason most experts recommend the double-action revolver as a "starter gun" for new shooters.



S&W lightweight Centennials have been the choice of experts for deep concealment for more than half a century. Top: Original Centennial Airweight, circa 1953. Center, Model 442, early '90s, with Eagle grips. Bottom, Model 340 M&P, with factory-furnished Hogue grips, introduced 2007.

Revolver or Auto

As you assess your particular balance of needs, you'll find some stark differences between the attributes of the double action revolver and the semiautomatic pistol. Let's go for a quick overview.

All autoloading pistols have long bearing surfaces between slide and frame, making them sensitive to proper lubrication. They are also depended on clean, pristine magazines with unfatigued springs. Thus, auto pistols are more maintenance intensive than revolvers, which can be left unlubricated and at rest literally for decades with no degradation in function. Military spec auto pistols such as the Glock, Beretta, SIG, etc. have large tolerances between the moving parts, allowing them to function when sand or dirt get in the mechanism; the more finely fitted revolvers may choke if dropped in a sand pile or immersed in mud. Thus, while the revolver is more forgiving of lack of routine maintenance, the automatic is more forgiving of field abuse.



Kel-Tec P3AT (below J-frame S&W shown for comparison) is extremely flat and easy to carry, but author does not trust its 380 cartridge as much as he does 38 Spl. +P.

In the serious defense calibers (38 Special and up) revolvers have only five shots in the small frame models, six in the standard frame, and occasionally seven or eight in the larger, progressively harder to conceal sizes. The smallest 9mm autos start at seven rounds on board, quickly progress to ten or eleven, and if you can carry a light polymer-frame, full size 9mm auto, you're up to 18 rounds or so, twenty if you don't mind a small magazine extension protruding from the butt. With quick-interchanging magazines, the autos are also much faster to reload. By any measure, if firepower's what you want, a semiautomatic is what you need.

Most semiautomatics can jam if pressed against an assailant's body before firing, as can happen in a belly-to-belly fight to the death or rape attempt. The pressure will push most autos' slides out of battery, or firing alignment of the parts, preventing even one shot from being fired. If the first shot discharges, viscous blood, fat, and brain matter may be back-blasted from a shot against bare flesh into the barrel bushing area of the autoloader as it cycles, preventing the slide from closing into battery for a subsequent shot. With a revolver, however, this is not a consideration. If your likeliest threat profile is a contact-distance mugging, rape, or murder attempt, the revolver will give you an advantage. Muzzle contact shots are particularly devastating since the violently expanding gases of the muzzle blast are directed into the opponent's body, causing massive additional damage.



The carry gun of your choice will probably be available in a variety of size formats. Here are the four currently produced 9mm Glocks. From top, target size G34; service size G17; compact G19; subcompact G26.

Revolver shooters have tended historically to practice with light loads, using mild wadcutters or feeble 130-grain generic 38 Special range loads for training, and then loading monster Elmer Keith Memorial Magnum loads of 357 persuasion for the street. Cops got away from that long ago, because they realized that light loads didn't prepare the officer to hit with a hard-kicking gun at the moment of truth. Too many private citizens still delude themselves this way. An advantage of the auto pistol is that it won't run with light loads, forcing the shooter into relevant practice.

Shorter, more efficient auto pistol loads tend to produce less muzzle flash at night than revolver ammo of equivalent power levels, i.e., 38 Special versus 9mm, 357 Magnum versus 357 SIG, or 45 Colt versus 45 ACP or 45 GAP (Glock Auto Pistol). The less muzzle flash, the less the shooter is blinded by his or her own weapon, another advantage to the auto.

Autos tend to have squared-off "handles" that press tightly against the body, particularly in pocket, ankle, belly-band, or other deep concealment carry modes. This means the fingers of the drawing hand

may have to fight a little to get between the flesh and the gun to gain a drawing grasp. The rounded profile of the small frame revolver allows a much faster grasp, hence a much faster draw. Score a point for the revolver here, particularly in pocket, ankle, or belly-band carry.

Revolvers tend, overall, to be somewhat more reliable than auto pistols, which can jam from being held with a limp wrist, from using too short or too long a cartridge, or from lack of lubrication or magazine damage. Particularly for non-experienced shooters and those who don't routinely lubricate their guns, this gives the "wheelgun" a reliability edge. (Auto shooters, remember to lubricate your carry gun monthly, even if you don't shoot it. Lubricant is liquid; it drains and evaporates.) If you carry in an ankle holster, grit builds up on the gun quickly. Only a few "military-spec" small autos seem to survive this buildup without jamming: the Kel-Tec P11 and P3AT, the baby Glocks, and the Kahrs, for example. Revolvers tolerate this grit buildup in ankle holsters much better.

One thing we've seen more and more since autoloaders became predominant in police work is that if they are carried with a manual safety locked in the "safe" position, they offer an element of proprietary nature to the user if a criminal gains control of the weapon. This feature is generally the province of auto pistols instead of revolvers. However, the K-frame (38-size frame) or larger S&W revolver can be converted to Magna-Trigger configuration by Rick Devoid. Such a conversion can only be fired by someone wearing a magnetic ring. When my little ones were not yet at an age of responsibility, my "house gun" (and often my carry gun) was a 4-inch barrel Smith & Wesson 357, MagnaTriggered. It will come out of retirement now that I've got grandkids. I gave a 2 1/2-inch barrel MagnaTrigger Combat Magnum to my youngest when she became a mom - Devoid tuned the action, too - while her older sister was comfortable with her pet S&W Model 3913 9mm automatic in this regard, since it is equipped with both manual safety and magazine disconnect safety. Devoid (www.tarnhelm.com) can also fit a Cominolli thumb safety for all Glock pistols but the Model 36, offering proprietary nature to the user to Glock fans.



The old revolver paradigm, seen with S&W 38 Specials. From top: 6-inch K38 for pistol team use, 4-inch Combat Masterpiece for uniform wear, and 2-inch Chiefs Special for concealment needs.

There are other factors to consider, but these are the key points. They help to explain why serious shooters today seem to prefer autoloaders, but most experts recommend revolvers for beginners and for that class of gun owners that expert Mark Moritz defined as NDPs, or non-dedicated personnel. It also explains why the revolver is so popular as a hideout/backup gun among even highly trained gun people.

When in doubt, do what I do. With a service-grade automatic on my hip and a light, snub-nosed revolver in my pocket, I figure I'm covered whether St. Peter turns out to be a Bill Jordan/revolver fan or a Jeff Cooper auto fan when I meet him on Judgment Day...

Concealed Carry Gun Features

Whatever your choice, there are some features that are particularly suitable for concealed carry. You want a carry gun that is snag-free. No sharp edges. Nothing to hook on clothing and reveal the pistol, or wear holes in the garments, or catch on fabric and fatally stall a defensive draw. If you just have to have a sharp-edged, non-ramped front sight, make sure your holster has a "sight channel" that will prevent "catching." Some shooters really do have a need for adjustable rear sights - they're carrying a hunting handgun or match handgun that needs to be precisely zeroed, and may need the sights adjusted to take advantage of different ammunition power levels - the edges of those sights should be rounded, even if a custom gunsmith has to do it.



Your model of choice may be available in various lengths. These are single-action-only SIG P220 45s. From top: 5-inch barrel target model, 4 1/4-inch service model, and 3.9-inch "Carry" model.

Make sure the grip and grip-frame area give the hand enough traction if wet with sweat or blood or rain. The defensive handgun, remember, is an emergency tool. Smooth metal frames coupled with pearl or even ivory "handles," if the latter don't have finger grooves, might as well be coated with wet soap.

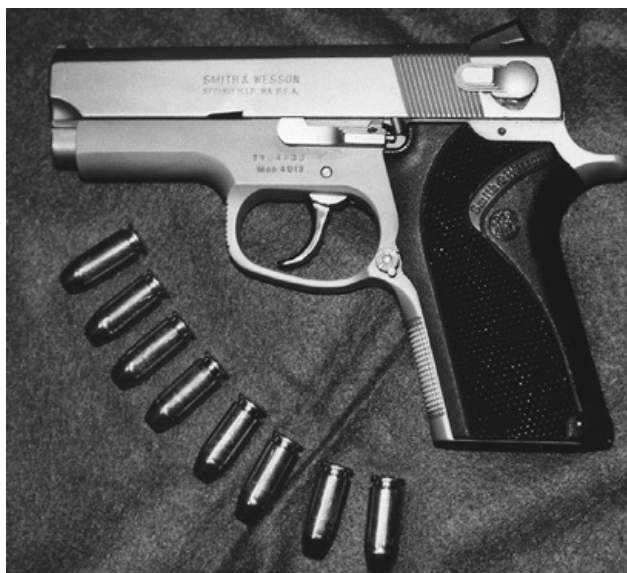
Some secure grip surfaces can be too tacky for concealed carry. Depending on the garments, “rubber” grips have been known to catch inner clothing surfaces and hike up the garment to reveal the handgun. Skateboard-like grips that lock the gun solidly into the hand can abrade coat linings. I find I can wear them next to bare skin, but a lot of my colleagues find them agonizing. On the other hand, some of those folks can wear cocobolo grips next to their skin, but in my case they cause an angry red rash. There are a lot of individualistic little tastes that you develop over years of concealed carry, and they tend to be highly subjective.

Night sights are a good idea. Most armed encounters occur in dim light, and Tritium sights can help. When you wake up in pitch darkness in a strange motel room, those glowing sight dots guide your hand to the bedside defense sidearm like airstrip landing lights. Laser sights, particularly the convenient designs such as LaserMax (replacing the recoil spring under the barrel in popular autos), and the Crimson Trace LaserGrip (bolt-on, for popular revolvers and autos) can enhance your hit potential in the dark. They’re a Godsend for those with vision problems that allow them to identify a threat, but don’t let them focus on gunsights that are at arm’s length. The deterrent effect of the red laser dot on a suspect at gunpoint may have been over-rated by manufacturers and advertisers, but if there’s a chance of that working, it’s a chance you want on your side. Laser sights are also a tremendous training aid in dry fire and even live fire, allowing the shooter to better become accustomed to holding the gun as steady as possible as the index finger smoo-oothly rolls the trigger back until the shot.

White light attachments make great sense for home defense, and it is logical to purchase as an all-around defense pistol an autoloader that has integral frame rails that allow slide-on/slide-off units by SureFire, InSight, Streamlight, Blackhawk, and so on. Police are going to larger holsters made to carry light-mounted guns, and a few manufacturers (Blade-Tech, for one) produce concealable holsters that carry light-mounted automatics. As the light units become smaller, this practice will become more practical for concealed carry.

Size and Shape Factors

Bulges under the clothing are the key enemy of effective concealment, and the “handle” area of the gun tends to be the biggest offender here. The long grip-frame of a full-size duty pistol is best concealed by carrying it on the strong-side hip, tilted sharply forward until the backstrap of the grip is pointed almost at the armpit. This may require a slight crouch to effect the draw, but that’s something most people do in a high-stress danger situation anyway.



Carry gun of author's oldest daughter is this Sokol-tuned S&W Model 39. It holds nine rounds of 9mm and is a perfect carry size. SIG's analogous pistol, the P239, was advertised as "Personal Size," for good reason.

Nonetheless, smaller gun butts are a plus for concealment. One of the lesser recognized concealment secrets is that a medium-length barrel coupled with a minimized grip frame can give the carrier the best of both worlds. Three good examples would be the K-frame Smith & Wesson revolver with a 4-inch barrel and stocks cut level with the metal butt; my favorite concealed carry Colt 45 auto among the extensive line the company has offered since 1911, the CCO with 4 1/4-inch Commander

barrel and commensurate length slide mounted on the short-butt Lightweight Officers frame; and the popular Kahr Covert series, in which the barrel/slide of their standard-length guns (compact by most other makers' standards) is mated with the stubby frame of their Micro models. With autos, this generally reduces cartridge capacity by a round or two due to the necessarily shorter magazine, but that's a reasonable price to pay for a gun that conceals like a snubby but shoots like a service pistol. My old friend Marty Hayes, the master shooter and instructor who directs Firearms Academy of Seattle, once created a Glock 40 perfect for concealed carry that I called the Glock 22-1/2. He took the standard service-size sixteen-shot Glock 22 and shortened its butt to take the 13-round Glock 23 magazine. This gave maximum concealment, still offered an excellent grasp, and a total of fourteen versus sixteen rounds was not deemed to be an unfair price to pay for the improved concealment.

Rounded butts work well. Ed Brown came up with a "bobtail" lower rear end for his own line of factory custom 1911 automatics, which he has licensed to the Dan Wesson company for their brand and which is available for custom gunsmithing as well. With any handgun (revolvers are particularly suitable) rounding the edges of the grips at the bottom will improve concealability.

Additional Safety Factors

The trigger pull should be smooth on a defensive handgun, but not particularly light. One factor that occurs to human beings under stress is vasoconstriction. Blood flow is redirected away from the extremities and into the internal organs and major muscle groups, as if to "fuel the furnace" for the superhuman effort about to come. This is why frightened Caucasians become deathly pale, and it is why people in life-threatening stress situations become grossly clumsy. A light trigger pull can now much more easily discharge prematurely and unintentionally.



Author has carried this Browning Hi-Power, tuned by Cylinder & Slide Shop, coast to coast in the U.S.A. and from Europe to Africa. Great feel and "shootability" combine with thinness to make it more concealable than it looks in profile. Worldwide availability of Browning parts and 9mm Luger ammo doesn't hurt, either.

There are two problems with this. One is the potential for unintentional discharge itself. (Yeah, I know, it's trendy to call it "negligent discharge" unless there was a mechanical defect. I've worked in the criminal justice system since 1972, and I still believe in the "innocent until proven guilty" part. The automatic assumption of negligence if the discharge was not caused by mechanical failure seems to have arisen from firearms academies sponsored by liability conscious firearms manufacturers. I'm still comfortable with the term "accidental discharge" (AD) until negligence has been clearly and convincingly proven.)

Accidental discharges, sometimes with tragic and fatal results, have been clearly and convincingly related to very light trigger pulls over the years by countless police departments. Decades ago, the police departments of Los Angeles and New York City went to double-action-only revolvers, because so many bad things had happened with revolvers cocked to single action. NYPD now mandates a nearly twelve-pound (NY2, or "New York Plus") trigger module in all Glock pistols carried by members of their service. The New York State Police, for the exact same reason, pioneered the original "New York trigger" (NY1) for the Glock 17 9mms they adopted in the 1980s, and for the Glock 37 45 GAPs they carry today. This brings pull weight up to 7.75-8.0 pounds. It works well under stress for accurate hits; it's actually less likely to break than the standard trigger spring it replaces; and I for one have it in each of the several Glocks I regularly carry concealed. In a 1911 pistol, no street-wise police instructor or gunsmith will recommend a single-action pull weight of less than four pounds, and most suggest something closer to five.



Gun expert Dean Speir pronounced the Glock 30 the ideal concealed carry pistol. Match-accurate and totally reliable with duty loads, it carries 11 rounds of 45 ACP.

The second problem with the light trigger pull is the false allegation of an accidental discharge. Here's the situation I've seen play out over and over again in both civil and criminal cases over the years. Good guy shoots bad guy. Publicity-hungry prosecutor or money-hungry plaintiff's lawyer needs a scapegoat to grab political or financial profit. This attorney fabricates a case of accidental discharge due to recklessly cocking hammer and creating hair trigger (or carrying pistol that would always fire with "hair trigger"). This BS allegation is dignified in court as the accuser's "theory of the case." Without this frail hook on which to hang the bogus case, it probably would have gone away. Instead, the shooter who fired in self-defense goes through a nightmarish (and nightmarishly expensive) ordeal. See the "Aftermath" chapter.

One is wisest to avoid it entirely. The revolvers I carry for personal defense will fire double action only. Some came that way from the factory and some were modified. My carry autos are either double action (with heavier-than-target-grade trigger pulls even on single action), my XDs have 6 to 7 pound trigger pulls, none of my carry 1911s are lighter than 4 pounds, and as noted my carry Glocks have New York triggers in the 7-8 pound pull range. Anyone who tells you it's impossible to shoot well with these guns, doesn't know how to shoot. I've won IDPA matches with Glock and XD pistols in the above pull weights, and for three years running won the NH Police Association annual state shoot with a Glock 22 that had a New York trigger, shooting against some who had put 3.5 pound pulls in their guns before the match.

Selecting the Gun Wardrobe

In a clothing store, it's hard to go wrong with "the basics": "basic black," gray pinstripe, and all of that. In the world of CCW, the first of "the basics" is a small revolver.

S&W's J-frame series is the odds-on choice of professionals. High quality, smart engineering, and a wide range to choose from: 22, 32 H&R Magnum (off and on), 38 Special, and 357 Magnum. My advice would be to go with the 38 Special, though the little 22 Kit Guns make great "understudies" for cheap practice. An all-steel 2-inch (actually 1 7/8-inch barrel in most cases) will run about 20 ounces. The aluminum frame Airweights go about 15 ounces, a profound difference when the gun is carried in a pocket or on the ankle, but much less noticeable in a belt holster. The AirLites are available in various mixes of Titanium and Scandium, and are proportionally expensive due to the rare materials used in their construction, but they can get down to the eleven and twelve ounce weight range. There's no excuse not to carry when adequately powerful handguns come this light.



This late model S&W has current style cylinder latch, designed not to ding the thumb upon recoil, and above it the Internal Locking System, which purists despise and new shooters seem to like.



Introduced in 2007, this Model 40-1 Classic was the first S&W in years to appear without the internal lock. It has the old "lemon-squeezer" grip safety, and traditional square latch that purists associate with the S&W breed.

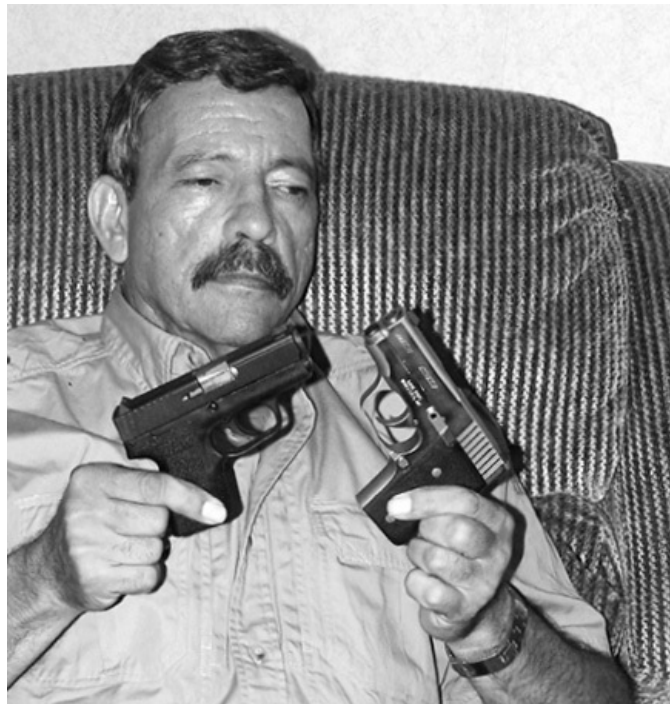
Of course, the lighter the gun, the harder it kicks with the same ammunition. The all-steel small frames aren't too bad, even with 38 Special +P ammo. The Airweights are downright unpleasant, and after I've finished a 50-shot qualification I'm glad it's over. The AirLites, however, are downright painful, and with Magnum loads they're torture devices. I find them more painful to shoot than the

mighty Smith & Wesson 500 Magnum hunting revolver, by far. If you get them in 357, load them with 38s and do yourself a favor.

It's a myth, by the way, that it's OK to practice with mild loads but carry monster Magnums because somehow, fight or flight reflex will make up for the kick in an actual defensive shooting. True, the dump of nor-epinephrine and endorphins that accompanies high level body alarm reaction may block the pain of the recoil, but that won't keep a too-powerful gun from twisting in your hand and preventing you from getting fast, accurate follow-up shots. You don't need me to tell you that a hit with a 38 Special beats a miss with a 357 Magnum.

The J-frame - a 32-size frame with a cylinder bored out for five 38 rounds instead of six 32s - can be had in three styles, all dating back to the period between 1949 and 1955. The original Chiefs Special series is the "conventional style" double-action revolver, with exposed hammer that allows thumb-cocking to single action. The Bodyguard style is that gun with a built-in "hammer shroud" patterned after the bolt-on Colt shroud introduced shortly before, which keeps the hammer spur from snagging on clothing or pocket linings during a fast draw. A small button-size portion of the hammer is exposed to allow thumb-cocking for light-pull single-action shots. The third variation is the Centennial series, known colloquially as a "hammerless" but actually having a hammer that is totally enclosed inside its streamlined frame.

It is generally accepted that for fast defensive shooting, double action is the way to go. With this in mind, the Centennial is clearly the best bet, followed by the Bodyguard, followed by the Chiefs. The reason is found by analyzing shooter ergonomics in live fire, not theory born in dry fire.



Carry gun choice involves a balance of "heavier gun easier to shoot, lighter gun easier to carry." Author weighs choice between 14 oz. Kahr PM9 (left, all black) and 22 ounce Kahr MK9 (stainless, right). Each is a 7-shot 9mm of identical overall dimensions.

When a revolver recoils, it wants to torque its muzzle up and to the side. With the conventional-hammer Chiefs series, the butt can roll up into the web of the hand, getting after one to three shots to a position where that web of the hand blocks the hammer and prevents subsequent shots from being fired until the gun is re-gripped. That won't happen with the Bodyguard, whose hammer is shielded within its slot, and whose shroud is shaped in a way that catches at the web of the hand and prevents "roll-up." The Centennial is even better, because not only can't the gun roll up, but in addition the shape of the rear frame allows the shooter's hand to grasp the gun higher. This lowers the bore axis vis-à-vis the gun hand and arm, keeping the muzzle down, and maximally enhancing the shooter's recoil recovery rate for the most accurate possible rapid fire.

Because the Centennial can only be fired double action, it also prevents cocked gun accidents and possible false accusations of same. All these reasons have combined to make the Centennial series not

only the most popular of the J-frames overall, but in most years of late the best seller among J-frames overall.

Factoring in cost, shootability, and portability, the S&W Model 642 Airweight is my personal choice among all those available, most of which I own or have owned and all of which I've shot. It's the one I'd personally recommend. Taurus has a line of similar revolvers in all three hammer styles which are acceptable alternatives, trading less fancy finish for a lower price tag.

Going up a notch, there are slightly larger revolvers that are more powerful. The two I could most strongly recommend are the snub-nosed Ruger SP101 357 Magnum and the 2-inch barrel Taurus Tracker in 45 ACP. The latter takes the rimless auto pistol cartridges in a fast-loading "moon clip," and mine shoots to point of aim at 25 yards with groups like a service revolver's. The SP also has target-grade accuracy. Each has extra-cushiony trips to bring their recoil down to manageable levels. In the 25-ounce weight range, these are too heavy for my taste for pocket or ankle carry, but for the person who wants a small, powerful snubby in a belt holster, they're great.

Next on the "concealed handgun wardrobe necessities list" is a compact semiautomatic pistol, if you're comfortable with that type of handgun. Glocks in compact (G19 9mm, G23 .40, G32 .357 SIG, G30 .45 ACP, and G38 .45 GAP) are all good choices. So are the many other compact (i.e., medium size) modern autos you'll find in the Gun Digest, where there's more space to pore over the various models and size/weight specifications than here. In the 1911, Commander and Officers size work well. For many, something more sub-compact fits the body better. These would include the "baby Glocks" in the same calibers, the Micro-series Kahrs, and the smallest of the 1911s by their many makers.



Even gun color is a debatable issue. Some like matte black, as in the Kahr PM9 above, because it doesn't call attention to the gun. Others want the bad guy to realize he's at gunpoint, and like the conspicuous silver color of stainless MK9, below, by the same maker.

Finally, a full-size gun makes particular sense under cold-weather wardrobes, which can amply conceal them. In cold weather, with gloved or cold-numbered hands, a pistol with a longer grip-frame may be easier to handle. I like something with a large trigger guard, and whose trigger won't rebound so far forward that it can snag on or be blocked by thick glove material, which could make it fail to re-set. A TDA auto pistol will generally fill that bill, as will the Glock or XD. I get leery of single-action pistols when cold or gloves have further reduced a vasoconstricted hand's ability to feel the trigger, and the glove-blocking factor leaves most revolvers out entirely.

The bottom line of "concealed handgun wardrobe selection" is this: the gun's size and shape must fit hand, body, and clothing selection alike. You probably don't dress the same every day. When you "dress to kill" (forgive me, I couldn't resist) you also need to vary that particular "wardrobe" to better suit your daily needs.

Final advice: In the immortal words of author and big game hunter Robert Ruark, "Use Enough Gun." Small-caliber weapons simply don't have the "oomph" to stop a violent human being. I coined the phrase "Friends don't let friends carry mouse-guns," and I'll stick by that. The cessation of homicidal human threat is the *raison d'être* of CCW. If the Weapon you're Carrying Concealed isn't powerful enough to do that job, you've undercut the whole purpose of the mission. I personally draw the line above the marginal 380 ACP and consider the minimums to be 38 Special +P in a revolver and 9mm Luger in a semiautomatic pistol. On the top end, only master shooters can handle the violent recoil of

41 and 44 Magnums. For most people, the best bet is in a caliber range that encompasses 38 Special, 357 Magnum, 9mm Luger, 40 Smith & Wesson, 10mm Auto, 45 ACP, and 45 GAP. There are other rarely-carried rounds within that range, but any of those – with proper high-tech hollow-point defensive ammunition – can be reasonably counted on to get you through the night.

For more on gun and ammo selection, I'd refer you to my *Gun Digest Book of Combat Handgunnery, Sixth Edition*, available from Krause. The bottom line is, it's not about "what gun did you have" so much as it's about "did you have a gun?" Modern ultra-compact, ultra-light 38 Special and 9mm Luger handguns give you adequate power in extremely small and light packages. You just don't have to settle for anything less, when innocent lives – including your life and the lives of those you most love – will likely be at stake if and when the shooting starts.

Chapter 11

Defensive Handgun Ammunition Selection

Sterile lab testing in ballistic gelatin is great, but the ultimate laboratory is the street, the author maintains. Here are the loads that seem to be doing best there, input written in blood from gunfights police departments have experienced with this ammunition.



Premium lines from four big makers, covering four popular calibers. This, for the most part, is the type of round the author recommends.

Defensive ammunition choice is about picking what works best to neutralize armed and dangerous human beings before they can maim or murder. Scientific testing of ammo in ballistic gelatin can help predict bullet performance in the field, but at the end of the day, it is the performance and not the prediction that will matter.

Thirty-four years of carrying a sworn police officer's badge, 20 years as chair of the firearms committee of the American Society of Law Enforcement trainers, and several years now on the advisory board of the International Law Enforcement Educators and Trainers Association have combined with several trips to major seminars of groups like the International Law Enforcement Firearms Instructors Association and the International Homicide Investigators Seminars to give me a solid base of cops who've investigated a lot of shootings for their departments. These aren't "war stories," they are full investigations of shootings including evidence recovery, complete autopsy and forensic ballistic testing protocols, and intensive debriefings of the shooters and the witnesses. From that collective pool of knowledge emerges a profile of which duty cartridges perform the best.

OBVIOUSLY, POLICE ISSUE AMMUNITION IS USED IN A SIGNIFICANT MAJORITY OF THESE SHOOTINGS. That's why police duty calibers and loads have the strongest "data bases" to learn from.

Fortunately for armed citizens, they and the police tend to choose the same calibers. Picking a load that has proven itself on duty with the police gives the armed citizen added confidence in what their

chosen gun/cartridge combination can deliver. As many have noted, using ammunition that is widely issued to police is a strong defense against unmeritorious courtroom allegations such as, "He used evil hollow point bullets that rend and tear, and that shows he had malice in his heart!"

Let's look at what the "street feedback" is indicating is working best in the "ultimate laboratory" these days.

38 Special

Concealed carry permit instructors tell me that the 38 Special revolver, usually in compact short-barrel form, is one of the most common guns brought to their classes by students, and often the single gun that their graduates most commonly carry on the street. For most of the 20th Century, this caliber revolver was also by far the most popular in law enforcement, with plainclothes and off duty officers generally carrying "snubbies," and uniformed personnel generally carrying larger framed, longer barrel models.

At this writing, there are still thousands of senior cops carrying "grandfathered" 38 revolvers on duty in New York City and Chicago, and many more who carry them as backup or off-duty guns. In fact, the snub-nose 38 seems to be the most popular police backup handgun to this day, and is still widely used for off duty carry.



Cops have long understood that hollow point ammo is safer for all concerned. This is "FBI load," 158-grain +P lead semi-wadcutter hollow point, in a 4-inch Model 15 S&W service revolver. This was the bullet that "made" the 38 Special into a fighting handgun in the early 1970s, and is still a good choice except in ultra-light snubbies.

Only two cartridges really stand out as head and shoulders above the large pack of available 38 Special rounds. These are the "FBI load" and the "New York load."

The FBI load gets its sobriquet from the fact that this round was adopted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation circa 1972, right after Winchester introduced it. It was also adopted by the Chicago PD, and remains the 38 Special load of issue there to this day. Metro-Dade (now Miami-Dade) police likewise found it to perform superbly, as did cops throughout the U.S.A., and it continues to be known by some locally as the "Chicago load" or "Metro load." This cartridge comprises an all-lead, semi-wadcutter shaped hollowpoint bullet at +P velocity.

It works particularly well out of a 4-inch barrel, but cops quickly discovered that the projectile generally upset and expanded at least to some degree - even out of short barrels that reduced velocity. The reason was that with no tough copper jacket to peel back, the soft lead expanded more easily in flesh.

Winchester and Remington both produce this 158-grain LSWCHP +P round. The Remington seems to have the softer lead of the two, and therefore, opens a bit more dramatically. This is a good thing.

A few years ago, NYPD realized it still had some three thousand officers carrying 38 Special service revolvers as primary handguns, and that the overwhelming majority of their plus/minus 35,000 sworn personnel carried snub-38s as backup and off-duty guns. They approached Speer to create a load that would optimize 38 Special terminal ballistics when fired from a revolver with a barrel measuring 1-7/8 inches. Ernest Durham at Speer led the project, and the result has now become known colloquially as the NYPD load. It comprises a wide-mouthed 135-grain Gold Dot bonded, jacketed hollowpoint at +P velocity.

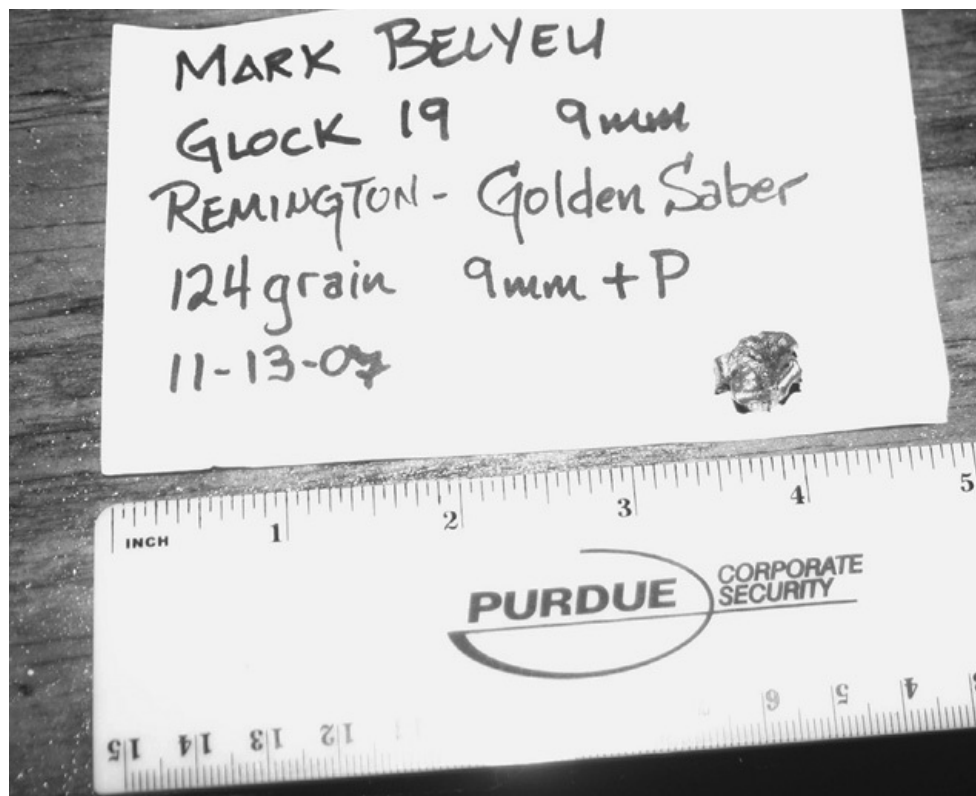
In numerous shootings with both snubs and 4-inch service revolvers, NYPD officials tell me that they are more than satisfied. Because of the lighter bullet, it kicks less than the FBI load, and because of the modern Gold Dot technology, it expands widely and reliably. They have found it to be a good man-stopper.

Either will work well. In a snubby, I prefer the Gold Dot for two reasons. First, the lighter recoil is helpful in fast, accurate shooting. Second, the all-lead FBI load is more lightly crimped than the Gold Dot, and when fired in a super-light snubby in the ten or eleven ounce weight range, such as the Titanium or Scandium S&W AirLites, recoil is so severe that after a shot or two, the projectiles can start pulling loose from the case mouths. They “prairie dog” up out of the chamber at the front of the cylinder, where they can strike the forcing cone of the barrel and lock the gun up solid. While this can happen with any make of the all-lead +P FBI load, it does not occur with the Speer NYPD load.

9mm Luger

The 9mm Luger (aka 9X19, 9mm Parabellum, 9mm NATO) is one of the most popular among armed citizens, and also still widely used by the nation’s police. As a result, we have a huge amount of street experience to tap into as to what works well and what doesn’t in this caliber.

In the late 1980s through most of the 1990s, 147-grain hollowpoints of conventional copper jacketed construction were the trendy issue rounds. They worked spottily – sometimes they expanded, and sometimes they just punched narrow little through and through wounds like ball ammo – and as a result, most departments that used this stuff either switched to more powerful calibers, or went to 9mm ammo that was going faster, with lighter bullets.

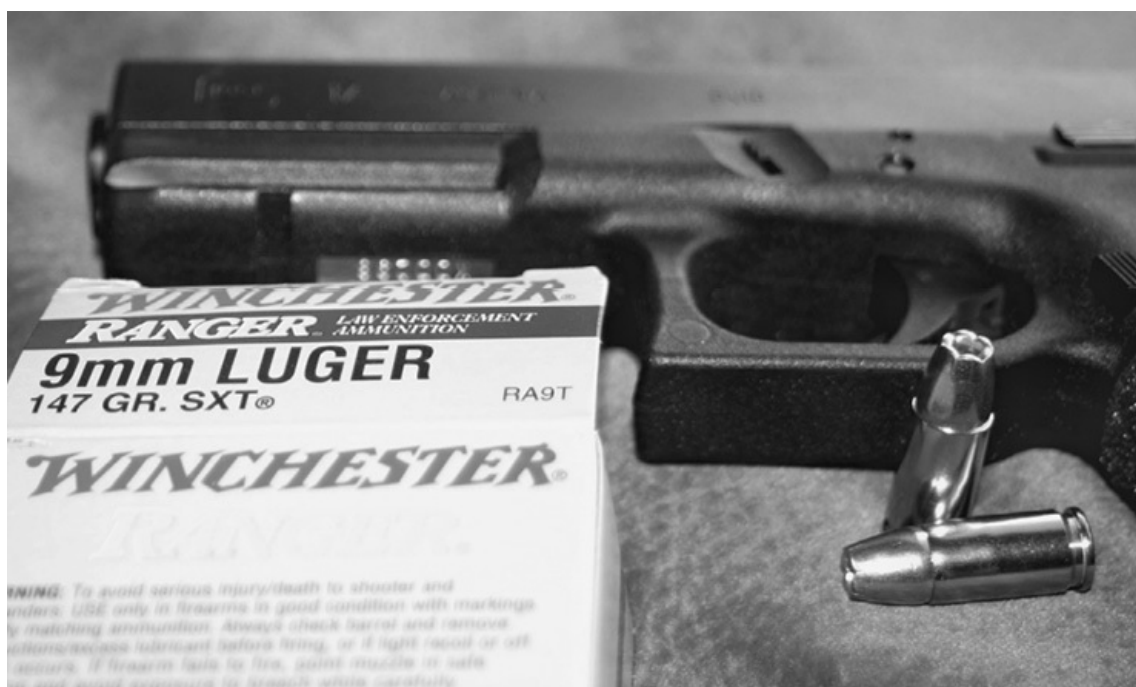


Remington Golden Saber 124-grain +P from 4-inch barrel Glock 19 killed man-size hog cleanly and instantly with one shot, penetrated deeply, and expanded to roughly 50-caliber.

For many years, the “Illinois State Police load” – a 115-grain standard JHP launched at some 1300 fps – proved itself to be the most decisive man-stopper available. It still works great. Federal’s version of this load, the 9BPLE, is standard issue for the DeKalb County lawmen, on the tough turf that surrounds and encompasses Atlanta, Georgia. These guys get into so many firefights that they’ve drawn political heat for “shooting too many people.” They have proven that when they shoot people with a 115-grain JHP doing 1300 foot seconds out of their issue Beretta service pistols, the bad guys go down and stop trying to kill them. This is A Good Thing.

Other loadings have emerged that have the same decisive stopping power in 9mm. They include Winchester’s 127-grain Ranger series +P+ at 1250 foot-seconds, and Speer’s Gold Dot 124-grain +P at the same velocity. Chicago PD switched to the 124-grain +P after multiple dismal stopping failures with 147-grain subsonic, and NYPD has used this round with great effect for some fifteen years. Both are delighted with it. Orlando cops are issued P226 SIGs and 127-grain +P+ Winchester, and many shootings since, they’ve found it to be as effective as any handgun caliber could be.

Personally, I carry the 9BPLE in one particular Beretta that shoots it better than any other carry load, and Winchester Ranger 127 grain +P+ in virtually all my other 9mm pistols, long or short barrel.



Winchester Ranger SXT is an example of modern 147-grain 9mm subsonic hollowpoints that have proven themselves suitable to police and citizen self-defense use. Earlier versions of this cartridge expanded erratically and often over-penetrated.

Some folks have bought into the theory that the 147-grain subsonic has been so widely recommended by authority figures, it must be good. The fact is, there’s a new generation of 147-grain subsonic that is pretty darn good. It utilizes new-generation high-tech expanding bullet technology expressly engineered to make the bullets open up at velocity below the speed of sound. These include the CCI Speer Gold Dot, the Federal HST, and the Winchester Ranger.

Amarillo, Texas Police report excellent results with their issue load for those officers who choose 9mm pistols, the 147-grain Gold Dot. A major department in the Pacific Northwest is now issuing Federal HST 147-grain subsonic, and reports excellent results in numerous shootings. LAPD and LA County Sheriff’s Department find that fewer officers and deputies are opting for larger caliber guns bought out of their own pockets, because they are reassured by how well Winchester Ranger 147-grain 9mm has worked for their brothers and sisters in numerous line of duty shootings.

Still, the faster bullets seem to be the way to go. There is much more corollary tissue damage around the wound channels with the faster 9mms, with medical examiners documenting “macerated” flesh, that is, tissue chopped up like burrito filling. You don’t see that with subsonic rounds, even though a high-tech modern 147 grain may actually expand very slightly more than a lighter 9mm bullet, simply because it has “more lead to spread.”

357 Magnum

One cartridge stands above all others in this caliber in the history of American law enforcement: the 125-grain semi-jacketed hollowpoint loaded to a velocity in the 1400 foot-second range (from a 4-inch barrel). Some experts argue whether the wide-mouthed Federal version of this load, or the scallop-jacket Remington version that originally popularized the 125-grain 357 among cops, is the single best of the breed. It seems to be an argument akin to how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. The Winchester 125-grain Magnum load does not have either of those features, but worked every bit as well for such departments as the Maine State Police when they carried 357 revolvers.

This round tends to create a wound channel that is nine to eleven inches deep, but very wide, with tremendous damage around the radius of the wound track. It also has a nasty muzzle blast and pretty sharp recoil. The great combat shooting trainer and combat pistol champion Ray Chapman used to say that the 125-grain Magnum load's almost magical stopping power was the only reason to load 357 instead of 38 Special +P ammunition into a fighting revolver chambered for the Magnum round. I tend to agree.

When departments such as City of Indianapolis Police Department, and the state troopers of Kentucky and Indiana issued that load, there were literally tons of bad guys shot with 125-grain Magnums, and they tended to go down "right now." Texas Department of Public Safety personnel were known to refer to this round's "lightning bolt effect," and I knew Kentucky troopers who called it "the magic bullet." Even though velocity dropped considerably from the 2.5-inch barrels of Indiana State Police detectives' Combat Magnums, or from the 3-inch Military & Police 357s of Indianapolis plainclothesmen, the bad guys seem to go down just as fast. The 125 grain 357 Magnum semi-jacketed hollow point earned its title, bestowed by expert Ed Sanow, as "King of the Street," and this remains the Magnum load of choice today. I have no personal preference between the Federal, Remington, and Winchester brands.

357 SIG

In the early '90s, spurred by Texas troopers and rangers who loved the SIG 45 pistol but missed that "lightning bolt" stopping power effect of their old 357 Magnum revolvers, SIG worked with Federal Cartridge to create the 357 SIG round. It resembles a 40 S&W necked down to 9mm, though the actual construction is somewhat more complicated than that. Different companies load to different velocities, and depending on pistol and barrel, factory 125-grain JHPs are delivering 1325 to over 1400 fps.

High-tech bullets that open rapidly but stay together seem to work best in this caliber. The most widely proven is the Gold Dot. From Texas to Virginia, it has been kicking butt with no horror stories of stopping failures. New Mexico State Troopers fell in love with the 357 SIG a few years ago, and stayed with that cartridge when they ordered their new S&W M&P auto pistols. North Carolina Highway Patrol gave up its beloved Beretta pistols after more than twenty years to adopt the SIG-Sauer, because they could get it chambered for 357 SIG.

Gunfights indicate that this cartridge is particularly good for shooting through auto sheet metal and window glass, yet does not deliver on the street the dangerous over-penetration that some gelatin tests had indicated might happen. The spent, expanded bullets are normally recovered from the far side of the criminal's body, or from his clothing, or from the ground within a few feet behind where he was located when shot.

Winchester Ranger in 125-grain 357 SIG has worked well in actual shootings. Remington Bonded Golden Saber in 125-grain 357 SIG is deliciously accurate, and performs superbly in FBI protocol gelatin testing, though I haven't run across any actual shootings with it yet. The overwhelming majority of 357 SIG shootings by police have occurred with the 125-grain Speer Gold Dot, and it has worked so well it is unquestionably the most "street proven" load in this caliber.

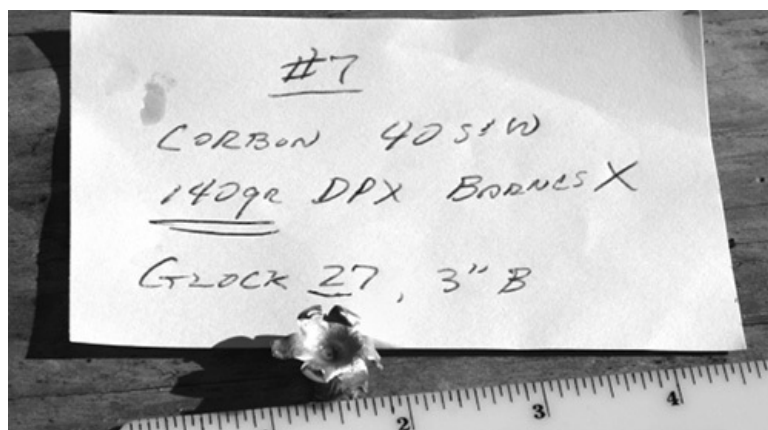
40 Smith & Wesson

Introduced in 1990 by S&W and Winchester, this 9mm Luger-length 10mm cartridge was designed to split the difference between the 9mm's higher round count in the gun, and the 45 auto's larger caliber. It succeeded hugely at that in police work, being chosen by more law enforcement agencies today than any other. It has become popular among armed citizens for that exact same compromise factor.



Affordably priced Classic line Federal 155-grain JHP has performed superbly in 40 S&W shootings by police in the field. Sometimes you don't need premium-price ammo to "carry with confidence."

First generation ammo, a 180-grain subsonic with a conventional JHP bullet, did better than expected, but still wasn't spectacular. It pretty much duplicates the ballistics of the old 38/40 blackpowder handgun load of the 19th century frontier. I've run across a lot of shoot-throughs with 180-grain standard JHP, more than would be desirable for home defense. Those who like the 180-grain subsonic's ballistics want to go with high tech hollowpoints that open more aggressively, penetrate a little less, and seem to produce a more decisive stopping effect. The 180-grain Gold Dot has earned a good reputation in cities such as Boston and Milwaukee. The 180-grain Federal HST has produced some truly impressive one-shot stops in the Pacific Northwest. The 180-grain Winchester Ranger, particularly in its latest iteration, also works distinctly better than a conventional copper-jacketed bullet of this weight and velocity.



This 140-grain 40 S&W Cor-Bon DPX, using all-copper Barnes X bullet, did a satisfactory job of quickly killing a large hog.

It appears that the medium-weight bullets at higher velocities are providing the best combination of penetration depth, expansion, and overall decisiveness of ending encounters. Not the 165-grain subsonic .40 – the so-called “minus-P” – but 165-grain JHPs traveling at 1140 or so feet per second, and 155-grainers at about 1200 fps. The latter has worked very well for the U.S. Border Patrol, which seems to have used mostly the Remington brand. Other non-high-tech .40 caliber JHPs in this weight range

that have delivered impressive performance are the Federal Classic and the Winchester Silvertip, both 155-grainers. These are also less expensive than the top-line premium lines.

High-tech bullets still do well in this weight range, though. The 165-grain Winchester Ranger and Speer Gold Dot seem to lead the pack by a narrow margin.

45 ACP

A standard pressure 230-grain 45 ACP with conventional JHP bullet pretty much duplicates the recoil and trajectory of GI hardball in the same weight, allowing cost-effective training once the user is certain the given pistol will feed the hollowpoint of choice. The 45's big bullet and well-earned reputation for stopping power make it more forgiving of less-than-optimum ammo choices, though you still want to stay away from full metal jacket because of its tendency to grossly over-penetrate, and to ricochet.



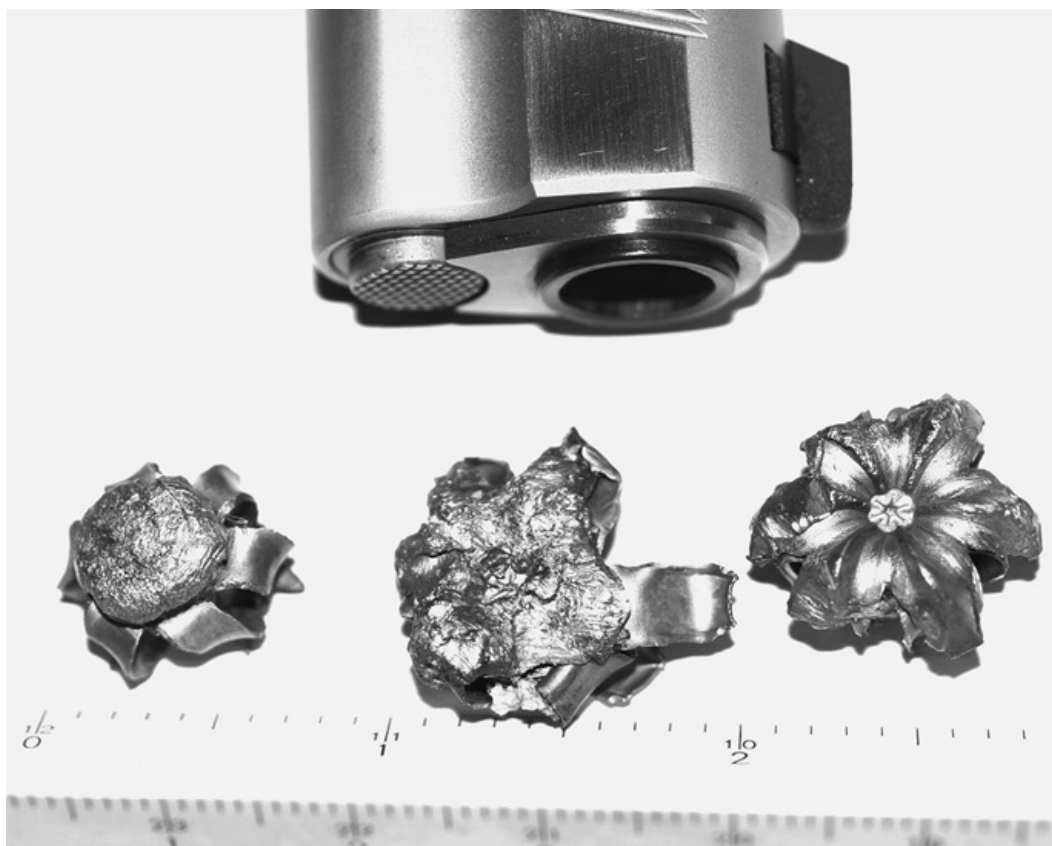
Kimber stainless 45, fully loaded and backed with two more eight-round ACT magazines of Federal 230-grain Hydra-Shok, gives the wearer a 22-round load-out. Elsewhere in the book, read the story of the man who got in trouble for carrying just such an outfit, but was acquitted once rationale for spare ammo was explained to jury.

In a low-priced round, generic Winchester 230-grain JHP “white box” is a street-proven choice. It used to be sold in boxes marked “For Law Enforcement Only,” if that tells you anything. For maximum effect, though, a premium bullet is the way to go. Federal’s Hydra-Shok is a well-proven man-stopper, long the “gold standard,” and still a good choice today, but expansion characteristics (especially through intervening substances) are enhanced in the new HST line from the same maker. CCI Gold Dot has worked well for numerous departments in both 200- and 230-grain weights; Remington 230-grain Golden Saber has worked quite well in the hands of certain units during the War on Terror; and one state police agency I’m aware of has experienced a string of one-shot stops with the Winchester SXT/Ranger 230 grain. These are all standard pressure loads.

Short barrel 45 ACPs are extremely popular among armed citizens today. CCI offers a Gold Dot Short Barrel 45 load, especially designed to open to full effect at lower velocities. I haven’t run across any actual shootings with it yet, but gel testing indicates that it has met its design parameters.

The +P 45 ACP has worked well in 185-, 200-, and 230-grain loadings. The 185-grain +P has earned a good “stopping power” rep in its conventional JHP loading from Remington and is also available in Hydra-Shok and HST formats from Federal, and in Remington’s own high-tech Golden Saber line. As a

rule of thumb, the 185-grain +P round will shoot pretty much to point of aim/point of impact out to roughly 100 yards in a pistol sighted in for 230-grain standard pressure 45 ACP at 25 yards. That makes it of special purpose interest to those in rural areas who can anticipate unusually long shots with their pistols.



Relative bullet expansion. Left, Winchester 127-grain SXT 9mm; center and right, Federal HST +P 45 bullets, each 230-grains. Larger bullets have “more lead to spread,” but lighter bullets can be run to higher velocities. Each creates massive wounds.

The 45 GAP, or Glock Auto Pistol, is a shortened and strengthened 45 ACP round at standard pressure. Guns for it have been produced by Glock, ParaOrdnance, and Springfield Armory. The state troopers of Georgia, New York, and Pennsylvania have adopted the Glock in 45 GAP as standard, and shootings with it using 200-grain Speer Gold Dot and 230-grain Winchester Ranger have thus far proven it to be the absolute equal of the 45 ACP with the same bullets. Look for this round to gain in popularity in years to come.

That concludes the feedback from the street, with the calibers most used by cops and, therefore, most thoroughly evaluated in the wake of intensive investigation of officer-involved shootings.

At the time of this writing, it's the best this writer has to offer.

THE DANGERS OF OVERPENETRATING BULLETS

One critical rule of firearms safety is that the bullet must stay in its intended backstop. No responsible shooter would go to one of the older indoor shooting ranges that have a warning poster saying “LEAD BULLETS ONLY, JACKETED BULLETS CAN PIERCE BACKSTOP” and then proceed to pump hard-jacketed bullets into that frail backing.



Winchester Ranger SXT 127-grain +P+ ammo in Glock magazine, compared to hole through muscle tissue made by such a bullet on hog. Remember this the next time someone tells you the bullet can only destroy what it physically touches.

On the street, the only safe backstop for the defensive handgun's bullets is the body of the offender. Therefore, it is not exactly responsible to be firing bullets that are likely to shoot through and through the assailant. This is one of the main reasons law enforcement in its virtual entirety has gone to expanding bullet handgun ammunition in this country. It was a lesson written in blood.

Seven Cases Highlight the Reality

In 1999, New York City became almost the last major police department to adopt hollow point ammunition. They did so in the face of huge, long-term opposition based on political correctness and the erroneous perception of hollowpoints as wicked "dum-dum bullets." One reason they were able to pass it was that the city fathers had been made to realize how much danger the supposedly "humane, Geneva Convention-approved" ammunition previously used presented to innocent bystanders and police officers when the duty weapons were fired in self-defense or defense of others by the officers.

From the early '90s adoption of 16-shot 9mm pistols (Glock 19, SIG-SAUER P226 DAO, and Smith & Wesson Model 5946) through 1999, NYPD issued a full metal jacket "hardball" round, comprising a round-nose 115 grain bullet in the mid-1100 fps velocity range. The New York Times exposed the following facts in its startling report on the matter:

"According to statistics released by the department, 15 innocent bystanders were struck by police officers using full metal jacket bullets during 1995 and 1996, the police said. Eight were hit directly, five were hit by bullets that had passed through other people and two were hit by bullets that had passed through objects," stated the Times.

In other words, in rough numbers, 53 percent of these tragic occurrences were apparently missed shots, while 33 percent were "shoot-throughs" of violent felony suspects. Counting bullets that went through objects to hit presumably unseen innocent victims (13 percent), that tells us that roughly 46 percent of these innocent bystanders were shot by over-penetrating bullets that "pierced their backstops." Let's call those victims Cases One Through Seven.

17 Officers Shot Due to Over-Penetration

The Times continued, "In that same period, 44 police officers were struck by gunfire using the old ammunition: 21 were hit directly, 2 were struck by bullets that ricocheted and 17 were struck by bullets that passed through other people." In round numbers, 52 percent of those "friendly fire" casualties were hit by bullets that apparently missed their intended targets. 42 percent passed through the bodies

of the intended targets after the bullets struck the people they were aimed at. Let's tally those victims of over-penetration as Cases Eight through Twenty-Four.

Why would officers hit more of their own brethren than "civilian" bystanders in this fashion? For the simple reason that while victims and potential innocent bystanders tend to flee danger scenes, the cops are conditioned to "ride to the sound of the guns." In a close-quarters situation where a violent criminal is attempting to harm or even murder another officer, cops try to grab him or stop him or even maneuver into a position from which to shoot him. All these actions can put them in the line of fire of brother officers.



The practice of carrying spare ammunition is a long-standing one. This 1960s vintage Colt Agent six-shot 38 revolver was carried for decades by now-retired Chicago cop James Moore. Bianchi "spill pouch" with six spare rounds of 38 Special was common practice to carry even off duty by Chicago coppers of the day.

Tunnel vision occurs in a majority of life-threatening encounters. This is the perceptual phenomenon of being able to see only the threat and being unable to cognitively recognize other people or objects that might be in the line of fire. Moreover, the body of the offender may simply block the shooter's view of the brother officer who is trying to apprehend or restrain the attacker from behind. In these situations, a "shoot-through" is highly likely to kill or cripple one of the Good Guys and Gals.

What does this have to do with private citizens' use of CCW handguns? Only this: Where the cops jump in to protect their brother and sister officers, brave citizens may step in to protect their actual brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, sons and daughters, or fathers and mothers. Now it is your loved ones who are behind the offender - unseen by you - when you discharge your CCW weapon.

Those 115-grain jacketed ball 9mm rounds will pierce more than two feet of muscle tissue simulating ballistic gelatin. So will 230-grain full metal jacket 45 hardball. By contrast, the depth of the average adult male thorax is probably no more than ten inches, from front of chest to back. Nor is it solid muscle: the spongy tissue and large air volume of the human lung offer little resistance to a bullet. It's not just about New York City and 9mms. In Arizona some years ago, a peace officer fired his 45 service automatic at a large male offender rushing him with a knife. He couldn't see that a brother officer was running up behind the offender to grab and restrain him. His gunfire dropped the offender...and passed through his body with enough force to deeply pierce the abdomen of the second cop, who had been trying to rescue the one who fired. That wounded officer almost died from those injuries, inflicted

unintentionally by shoot-through with 230-grain full metal jacket 45 ACP. Call that incident Case Twenty-Five.

Many years ago in Los Angeles, an Aryan Brotherhood thug took several people hostage in an office. He demanded an escape vehicle and threatened to start shooting hostages if he didn't get one. A vehicle was provided, and he got into the car with the victims. At this point, the LAPD SWAT team launched smoke, and two members of the team whom I happened to know moved forward through the gray cloud, their issue Colt 45 automatics up and ready. When the perpetrator reached for his pistol, the cops opened fire, using department-issue 230-grain hardball. They fired four shots between them, and killed the offender before he could launch a single bullet of his own. Autopsy showed any of the four hits would have been quickly fatal. However, only one of those bullets stayed in the offender's body. One of the three exiting slugs struck one of the hostages. Fortunately, the wound was not in a life-threatening location. LAPD quickly switched to hollowpoints, which is what they use today. Lesson learned. Call it Case Twenty-Six.

Ball Stops Poorly

Particularly in the small calibers, ball ammunition is infamous for its poor stopping power. When the Illinois State Police issued ball for their 9mm S&W pistols from 1967 through the early 1970s, their Ordnance Section told me, they never had a single one-shot stop on an armed felon unless he was hit in the brain or spinal cord. This led the ISP on an odyssey in search of more effective ammo, which culminated in the famously effective "Illinois State Police load," a 115-grain jacketed 9mm hollowpoint at +P+ pressure and 1300 fps velocity. Today, Illinois troopers carry 180-grain high-tech hollowpoint in 40 S&W caliber service pistols.

In Case Twenty-Seven, NYPD's last high-profile shooting incident with 9mm ball ammo, four plainclothes officers engaged a young man named Amadou Diallo when he turned on them pulling an object that appeared, in the poor light, to be a small automatic pistol. All four opened fire, and some five seconds later they had fired some 41 shots. Nineteen of those bullets struck Diallo before he went down and dropped the object he was holding, which turned out to be a black nylon wallet. Sixteen of the nineteen bullets had over-penetrated. Diallo died of his wounds. After a long and arduous trial, all four officers were acquitted. Had these officers been issued the department's new 124-grain Speer Gold Dot +P hollowpoints in time, there is an excellent chance that he would have gone down much sooner, perhaps with as little as one gunshot wound, giving Diallo a far better chance of survival. No such horror stories have happened on NYPD since the hollowpoint ammo has been general issue.

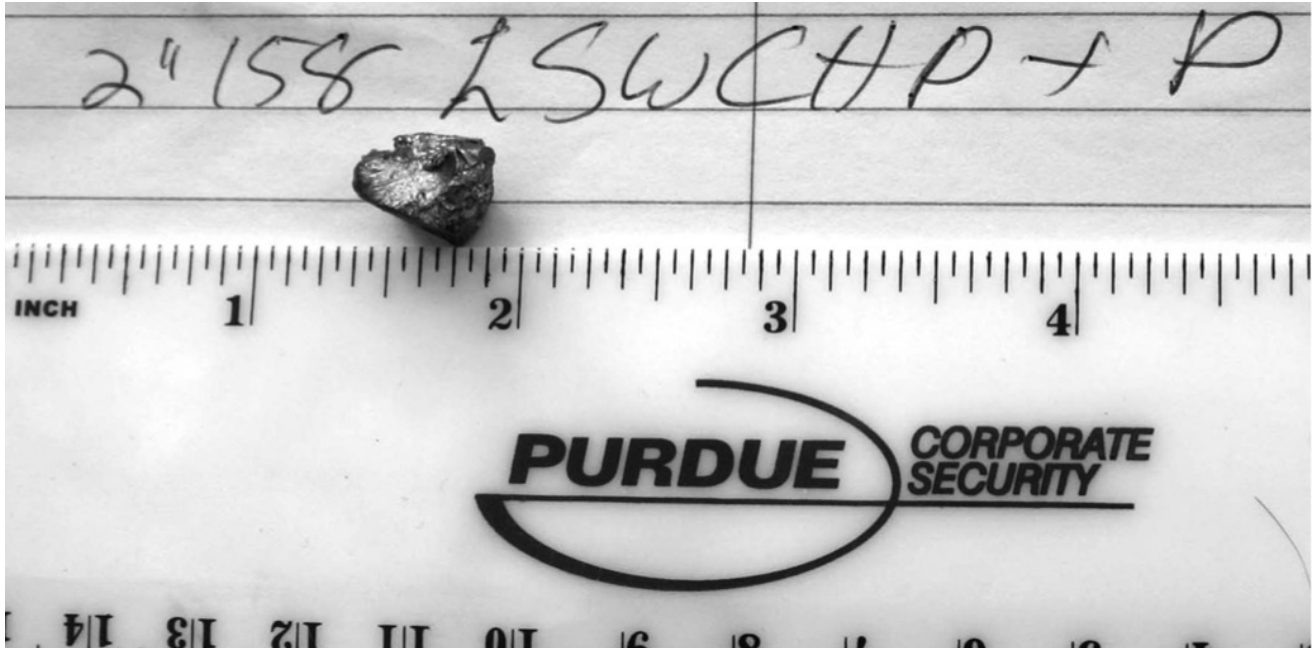
Forensic Concerns

When a bullet goes through and through a human body, it is not always possible to correctly determine entry from exit, particularly if the gunshot victim lives long enough for the healing process to begin. Consider Case Twenty-Eight, in which the O.J. Simpson lawyers defending him against charges of murdering his wife and her young male acquaintance laid plans to impeach one of the state's medical examiners by bringing up a previous case in which he had mistakenly diagnosed a through and through gunshot wound, confusing back-to-front and front-to-back.



Micro Kahr 9mm comes with spare magazine with finger extension that holds seven rounds, not counting eighth in chamber. With this kind of cartridge capacity, carrying spare ammo is all the more important.

In late 2007, this writer was involved in a murder case in Massachusetts where it was alleged that the defendant had shot his opponent in the back of the neck, with the bullet exiting his face, implying that he was in no danger and therefore could not have acted in self-defense. The death weapon was a Beretta Model 96F pistol, and the death bullet was a 180-grain round of full metal jacket UMC 40-caliber practice ammunition. In fact, the bullet had entered the face of the attacking man, and coursed rearward and downward before exiting the neck. However, the assailant lived for a week before he succumbed. During that time, he was lying supine in a hospital bed with his body weight pressing the exit hole down against dressings and bed clothes as his body worked to heal the injury. This gave the wound a puckered appearance consistent with an entry wound. At the same time, doctors and nurses were treating the open wound in the face, debriding it to prevent necrosis, so by the time he finally died, that wound had been cratered outward and mimicked an exit instead of an entry. The medical examiner had, apparently for these reasons, determined after death that entry was in the back and exit was in the front. Not until trial, after a three-year ordeal, did treating physicians familiar with gunshot wounds testify that when the “victim” came in, they diagnosed the wound as front entry/rear exit. Defense experts concurred, and the jury acquitted, as they should have. But Case Twenty-Nine probably wouldn’t have gone to trial at all if the defendant had loaded his gun with proper hollow points, which almost certainly would have left the mushroomed bullet embedded inside the back of the neck and shown beyond a shadow of a doubt that the attacker was in fact shot from the front.



Federal 158-grain lead hollowpoint +P, fired from 2-inch S&W into chest of hog. The bullet killed quickly, expanded to approximately 50-caliber.

Years before, in the Tampa area, I had been involved in a similar case that showed even the wrong hollowpoint can over-penetrate and cause the same confusion. In Case Thirty, a young undercover narc became involved in a struggle with an armed dope dealer who tried to kill him. The cop was able to turn the suspect's own gun on him, a snub-nosed Colt Lawman 357 Magnum revolver loaded with 158-grain semi-jacketed Magnum hollow points, which have a history of frequently over-penetrating. At very close range, the high velocity bullet caused a large, "explosive wound of entry" in the soft tissues of the throat, and being largely spent when it exited the back of the neck, left a smaller wound at that point. Once again, the suspect lived for many days, lying supine and undergoing treatment. After he died, the state's pathologist concluded that the small wound in the back of the neck must have been the entry, and the larger one in front must have been the exit, leading to the theory that he had been "shot in the back of the neck in a police execution." Fortunately, the pathologist had the presence of mind to section out the wound track and preserve the flesh in Formalin, and it was sent to the Southwest Institute of Pathology for deeper examination. There, gunshot residue embedded in the throat area of the wound track conclusively proved the bullet had come in from the front, exonerating the wrongfully accused young officer. But if the distance had been another couple of feet apart at the time the shot was fired, that critical exculpatory evidence would not have been there. This is another reason why it's best to use a bullet designed to stay inside the human body.

Irresponsible Attitudes

Some people either just don't get it, or have a totally irresponsible attitude. A popular Internet gun forum recently had a thread in its Caliber Corner section titled, "Why is over-penetration bad?" Most of those who posted had a pretty good grasp on the issue. One or two responsible, gun-wise participants even posted a link to the New York Times story and statistics above.



Winchester Ranger SXT 127-grain +P+ ammo in Glock magazine, compared to hole through muscle tissue made by such a bullet on hog. Remember this the next time someone tells you the bullet can only destroy what it physically touches.

Yet, even after that was posted, one participant wrote (the caps are his): "I have NEVER read ANY article or report addressing IDENTIFIED and actually occurring secondary victims." Now, you can put that down to simple ignorance, or haste in posting an opinion in a discussion he had not read and brought himself up to speed with. But how would you explain the following?

One fellow posted in the same discussion thread, "...and should over-penetration occur, oh well. The chances of it hitting someone else is practically non-existent."

Well, let's do the math. 46 percent of wounded innocent bystanders being hit by bullets that went through offenders' bodies or through objects that hopefully should have acted as backstops, is not "practically non-existent" by any stretch of the imagination. 42 percent of cops shot by friendly fire taking bullets that passed through the felony suspect first are not "practically non-existent." On the contrary, they are hugely significant.

In that same thread, one poster callously said, "It's too bad about the bystanders. I call it gene pool cleansing."

I don't think any comment is necessary on that one.

Never forget that we live in a time when police detectives are smart enough to get a warrant to seize the computers of those they investigate. Technology originally developed to track pornographers, child molesters, and white collar criminals will be applied to determine what Internet boards you may have posted to. When statements like "It's too bad about the bystanders. I call it gene pool cleansing," are discovered and tracked to the suspect, his conviction for something from attempted murder upward is almost a slam-dunk.

Ignorance won't save you. You've heard and read people say that over-penetration is irrelevant because missed shots are a more likely danger. First, a defense that says in essence, "You must forgive me this mistake because I figured I'd probably make a much worse mistake" is a frail reed that will not withstand the gale-force winds of cross-examination. Second, 53 percent misses versus 46 percent shoot-throughs in the unintentional bystander shootings in New York hardly makes the latter "irrelevant." 52% misses versus 42 percent shoot-throughs in the friendly fire shootings of cops in the same study obviously shows that the over-penetrating bullet is not an "irrelevant" danger.

The next time some Internet ninja advises you to load ball ammo for home or public defense, think of the above thirty cases. They are documented reality. And they are not the only such cases.

Collective reality has given us a message, and it is this: Save the over-penetrating “hardball” for range practice. Load your concealed carry or home defense handgun with ammunition designed, and proven to be likely, to stay inside the body of the offender who forces you to shoot him. It’s the responsible thing to do.

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eISBN: 978-1-4402-4220-5

This e-book edition: January 2014 (v.1.0)

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